

CABINET – 15 FEBRUARY 2018

REFERENCE FROM OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE (SPECIAL) –
23 JANUARY 2018

PEER REVIEW ACTION PLAN

254. Local Government Association Peer Review - Action Plan Update

The Interim Chief Executive introduced the report, briefly outlining the background to the Council's response to the Peer Review report and highlighting the key aspects of its recommendations and the action plan to address them. He confirmed that, beyond the tasks identified in the action plan, there were insufficient resources to undertake additional work.

The Chair had prepared a number of questions on the review and action; these were tabled at the meeting. The Chair put his questions to the Leader, Councillor Swersky and the senior officers present, and received responses as follows:

Para 2.4.1 (of the covering report): What mechanisms exist to ensure the Leader of the Opposition, Shadow Portfolio Holders and Scrutiny Leads are briefed on major issues? How many times have such mechanisms been activated?

The Interim Chief Executive reported that he met with the Leader of the Opposition on a fortnightly basis and the Corporate Directors also typically held regular meetings with relevant Opposition lead members. The Corporate Directors present confirmed that this was the case.

Para 2.4.7(of the covering report): What mechanisms exist that provide space for more effective cross-party policy development? Are their plans to introduce more?

The Interim Chief Executive reported that a meeting had been held the previous week involving the Chair and Vice-Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the Leaders of the political groups, to discuss the development of cross-party mechanisms to steer and monitor scrutiny work in future. There was a shared appetite for more cross-party work on prioritising the scrutiny programme and establishing a coordinated mechanism for the future. The Chair added that the group would be meeting again before the election.

Para 2.4.9 (of the covering report): Do we have capacity to keep focused on "The Day Job"?

The Leader of the Council pointed out that, given that this was the eighth or ninth year of austerity in local government budgets, there was much reduced capacity across the organisation. While the Council would be positive about finding ways to develop scrutiny work, the financial and operation constraints had to be recognised.

A Member asked about the recent collapse of Carillion and suggested that there had been insufficient cross-party liaison about the implications. The Leader of the Council disagreed with this, pointing out that he had spoken to the Leader of the Opposition on the very day the liquidation of the company had been announced and that email exchanges between them had followed. He had given assurances to the Leader of the Opposition about the issuing of future contracts of such scale.

The Member referred to the meeting of the Cabinet the previous week, arguing that the option in respect of Carillion proposed by the Administration at the meeting could have been shared with the Opposition in advance since its substance had already been placed in the public domain by Ealing Council. He said this approach flew in the face of the undertakings in the Peer Review action plan about closer joint working across political groups.

The Leader of the Council responded by saying he understood that work was being done on the document right up to the start of the meeting and that the Leader of the Opposition had been involved to the extent that was possible. The Leader would check on the circumstances and advise the Member accordingly. The Corporate Director, Community added that, following the Carillion announcement, both Leaders had been updated on a daily basis. The paper tabled at Cabinet had simply been a position statement at that stage, a position which had changed as quickly as the following day as a result of discussions with the liquidator. Efforts were being made to keep leading Members informed across the political groups. The Corporate Director, People reported that, in the context of commercial initiatives in his area of service such as the Infinity and Life Chances projects, there was improved cross-party working.

Councillor Mote acknowledged that cross-party work had generally improved since the publication of the Peer Review report. The Chair agreed that this had demonstrated the value of the review and he looked forward to the improvements continuing.

Recommendation 2 (of the action plan):

How frequent would be the informal cross-party discussions?

The Chair noted that this question had been addressed in a previous answer.

Recommendation 5:

Has the capital spend been reduced and will it be going forward?

The Director of Finance referred to the proposals made available to Members in the draft budget report; a consistent approach was planned over the next two to three years, including efforts to achieve revenue benefits in certain areas such as street lighting.

Recommendation 7:

How many times has Major Development Panel met in 2017?

It was reported that the Panel had met twice in 2017; one meeting had been cancelled due to lack of business and the next meeting was due in a month's time.

A Member considered that the current arrangements failed to assess adequately the cumulative impact of developments across the Borough and instead focussed on individual pre-application discussions about particular sites. The Peer Review had exposed this gap and an improved mechanism should be developed to address these deficiencies, providing a better flow of information and business for the Major Development Panel. Another Member stated that meetings of the Panel tended to be a “box-ticking” exercise with no real decisions being taken; he supported the proposal to make these mechanisms more effective.

The Leader of the Council acknowledged the points and suggested that the improvements be discussed at his next quarterly meeting with the Leader of the Opposition.

Recommendations 16 and 22:

Is there is a budget for new Member induction?

Apart from the role of the Scrutiny Leadership Group, how will other ways of allowing greater engagement of all members in the decision making process? Will there on going Member development not just at induction?

The Interim Chief Executive confirmed that there was a budget for Member induction and development, but it had been reduced in the last round of budget savings; the main expenditure tended to be in the first year of an Administration. The induction programme for May 2018 was being developed and ways of controlling the costs were being explored.

A Member referred to the mandatory status of some training, suggesting that the question of sanctions for failing to attend should be addressed.

The Interim Chief Executive accepted that the general Member development programme could benefit from a refresh and he would take this up with Group Leaders, including the issue of mandatory training.

Recommendation 19

When will the information sharing protocol be published to Members?

The Interim Chief Executive expected that it would be published in mid-March in time for discussion at the next quarterly meeting between the political group Leaders.

Recommendation 20

Will a new style Forward Plan be considered to cover all new policies other than key decisions?

The Interim Chief Executive advised that there was no intention to vary the current arrangements for publishing the Key Decision Schedule; however, it might be feasible to identify 10 or 12 topical items for particular consideration by Overview and Scrutiny councillors. The Leader of the Council added that he would discuss with Cabinet Members the options for closer liaison with Opposition leads, not just in respect of particular agenda items, but also about issues which might arise in future.

He anticipated that there would be consensus on the vast majority of issues and therefore suggested that attention be focussed on those issues where there was less agreement. The Chair agreed that there was a need to engage Members more broadly in project development opportunities.

Recommendation 27

Please give examples of how the skills and experience of ALL Councillors have been better utilised?

The Interim Chief Executive advised that, while there had been no specific decision to conduct a skills audit following the May 2018 elections, this could be discussed with the political group Leaders. He reported that Members were, and had been, contributed to various projects on a cross-party basis, including Project Infinity, Life Chances and the voluntary sector review.

Recommendation 34

Who are the members of this new corporate regeneration programme board and how do they report back to ALL Members?

The Interim Chief Executive reported that the new board had arisen from a review of the Council Strategy Board, following which it had been agreed that there would be monthly Corporate Regeneration Programme Board meetings chaired by the Corporate Director, Community. Councillors would be updated through the quarterly reports to Cabinet, relevant items at Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Scrutiny Leadership Group meetings, and Major Development Panel meetings as required.

A Member asked a further question concerning Recommendations 15 and 38 of the Peer Review report (Financing of the Regeneration Strategy and Contingency Planning for the Commercialisation Initiatives and Regeneration Programme). He was concerned that there had been no full financial modelling of the possible impacts and the effect on the Council's revenue budget was uncertain. In practice, these issues had been pushed "into the long grass", meaning that Members could not rely on the sustainability of these strategies.

The Interim Chief Executive explained that many of these projects were structured around a three-year budget timeline; rather than setting specific and detailed funding arrangements, the approach was more directional, indicating how the Council foresaw balancing the budget. Progress was carefully monitored and adjustments made in the budget as necessary in the next following year. The Director of Finance added that this was regularly reviewed by the external auditors and their assessment was that the Council was tracking the impact satisfactorily.

The Member argued that the Peer Review report had identified the need to improve contingency planning and risk assessment of commercial projects and large-scale development schemes. He gave the example of Project Infinity which should have been generated income for the Council by this stage rather than being treated as a budget-balancing item for future financial projections. He also referred to question's

at the previous week's Cabinet meeting about income anticipated from properties which had not yet even been built and the absence of a transport lobbying strategy.

The Interim Chief Executive replied by referring to the fact that the relevant recommendation from the Peer Review had been taken on board in the budget refresh exercise in January/February 2017. The Director of Finance added that a £2.3m saving was projected as a result of the regeneration programme and there had been open regular reports to Cabinet on progress, projections and implications; in the first three or four years of the programme, the Council was having to allocate funds with savings to follow later. The Interim Chief Executive confirmed that this way of managing the programme had been known, and communicated to Members at meetings, for some time now.

A Member wished to know who had written the action plan, whether it was in the public domain and who was responsible for its implementation. The Interim Chief Executive advised that he was responsible for implementation of the plan to which various senior officers had made contributions. The member pointed to the reference in respect of Recommendation 27 to the "Labour Group" taking the action on board and considered that this wording was unprofessional and embarrassing to the Council. The Interim Chief Executive accepted that the wording was inappropriate in naming the Labour Group and that the issue would actually be taken up on a cross-party basis with the Leaders of the political groups.

The Chair put to the meeting the following recommendations:

- a) That the Cabinet be recommended to support more frequent meetings of a cross-party nature to discuss major projects such Building a Better Harrow; and
- b) That the Cabinet be recommended to support reinstatement of the reduction in the Member improvement budget and a refresh of the Member development programme.

The Vice-Chair seconded these recommendations and also proposed the following additional recommendation which was seconded by the Chair:

That the Cabinet be recommended to support an appropriate level of resources for the Council's scrutiny function.

RESOLVED:

- a) That the Cabinet be recommended to support more frequent meetings of a cross-party nature to discuss major projects such Building a Better Harrow;
- b) That the Cabinet be recommended to support reinstatement of the Member improvement budget and a refresh of the Member development programme; and
- c) That the Cabinet be recommended to support an appropriate level of resources for the Council's scrutiny function.

FOR CONSIDERATION

Background Documents:

Minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee (Special Meeting on the Peer Review Action Plan) – 23 January 2018

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