

Overview and Scrutiny Committee (Special)

Minutes

17 October 2022

Present:

Chair: Councillor Amir Moshenson

Councillors: June Baxter
Govind Bharadia

Dean Gilligan
Phillip O'Dell

Apologies received: Councillor Dan Anderson
Councillor Eden Kulig

Councillor Vipin Mithani
Councillor Samir Sumaria

1. Attendance by Reserve Members

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

Ordinary Member

Councillor Vipin Mithani
Councillor Samir Sumaria

Councillor Eden Kulig
Councillor Dan Anderson

Reserve Member

Councillor Kuha Kumaran
Councillor Matthew Goodman-
Freeman

Councillor Jerry Miles
Councillor Antonio Weiss

2. Declarations of Interest

RESOLVED: To note that there were no declarations made by Members.

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

The Leader of the Council and the Chief Executive gave a presentation to the committee with the following highlights:

Achievements to Date included the following:

- One hour free on street
- One hour off street free parking in Jan
- Decisions on bulky waste collection for up to 4 items
- Two visits per day to HWRC
- Tall buildings SPD
- Reintroduction of performance reporting in the council
- The appointed a new CEO

Finance Overview included the following:

- The year overspend projection of £6million
- Inflation
- Likely pay settlement
- High cost placements
- MTFS Gap
- £16mil next year
- Further gaps beyond

The Leader informed the committee that challenges were compounded by the need to restore and retain reserves, anticipated rises in inflation and forecast rise in demand

New Priorities included schemes to Restore Pride in Harrow had the following priorities:

- Priority 1 – A Council that puts residents first
- Priority 2 – A Borough that is safe and clean
- Priority 3 – A Place where those in need are supported

Accommodation Update included the following:

- Harrow Hub became operational in April 2022 and is currently being assessed to determine occupancy levels.
- The Civic Building would be closed by December 2022 and ready for handover to HSDP by March 2023
- Providing safe and suitable customer facing facilities such as in person interactions at Green Hill Library and the new location of the Registrar's Office and the location of Citizens Advice Harrow at the adjacent unit in Sheldon House

Regeneration Sites Update included the following information:

Greenhill Way

- New Town Hall
- Min 200 units of accommodation

- Possible other uses
- Feasibility studies

Poets Corner

- Reduced height
- Additional family homes

Grange Farm

- Additional affordable homes and more family houses
- Positive land value
- November Cabinet proposes approval of Business plan and incorporation to HSDP

Byron Quarter

- Increased family housing
- Height reduction opposite neighbouring houses/ Belmont Trail
- Discussions re viability challenges and affordable housing

Peel Road

- Planning feasibility
- Replace HNC with additional residential
- Maintain height in opportunity area

Milton Road

- Reduction of one storey in height
- Improved scheme opposite residents and Mosque
- Ongoing cost discussions

Next Steps included the following:

HSDP Update and Grange Farm Business Plan

- Overview and Scrutiny: 8th November
- Cabinet: 17th November

Business Plans

- Byron: January Cabinet
- Peel: January Cabinet
- Poets: possibly January Cabinet

Greenhill Way/ town hall feasibility and costs

- November discussions
- NB Market and economy
- Viability challenges ongoing

The chair thanked the Leader and the Chief Executive for their presentation and invited Members to ask questions.

A member asked if there was any limitation put on the size of items? How would that affect the feasibility of the service.

The Leader of the Council explained that apart from the introduction of a free first collection, size and meterage requirements remained the same as the former scheme. A slight increase in demand for the service was expected and a decline in income was predicted because of the one-hour free parking scheme. Both schemes were under review and there was a lot of scope in the budget to provide for either increasing capacity for the bulky waste collection or dealing with any loss of income from the one-hour free parking scheme.

A Member asked that private evictions were on the rise and there were currently 22,000 people on the housing waiting list and 1,500 in temporary accommodation. What the plan was for these residents. The Leader explained that there is not much delivery of affordable and social housing. All programmes to increase social housing that allowed for new affordable housing had long lead timelines. The Council was working with residents, housing associations and other groups to resolve the issue.

A Member asked if the viability issue with regeneration sites would affect the 50 percent affordable housing target. The Leader explained that the Council's previous plans would not have delivered 50 percent affordable housing - the set target for London Plan for public Land. Viability of regeneration sites had been impacted by rising costs, but the Council was working with partners to maximise affordable housing to meet the increased demand for family affordable housing accommodation which might lower the percentage of affordable housing provided but deal with that need. The Scrutiny Committee would be informed of the plans.

A Member asked how the success of the one-hour free parking programme would be measured or determined and what had the impact had been to date. The Leader explained that it was too soon to tell as only 50 percent of the scheme had been implemented. The off-street parking part of the scheme was yet to be implemented. The Council was working with Michael Billington and his team to come up with a suite of measures to do that.

A Member asked if the council's policy of putting residents first was delivering. The Leader explained that yes, saving potentials of over 150,000 had already been identified this year. A new resources structure that aimed to deliver services in a more cost-effective way would be implemented. This would result in moving from some very expensive interim positions and recruiting to more a permanent structure.

He further explained that putting residents first would be a change in culture for the Council though it had a dedicated work force, but policy decisions, technology and systems appear not to have been designed to put residents first. The Council needed to be more responsive and accessible post covid hence the move to put a front desk in the Greenhill Library. This would be a change in culture of the Council which would not happen overnight.

A Member asked if the Chief Executive had any thoughts on the culture and direction of the Council. The Chief Executive explained that the Council's

workforce was made up of a good group of professionals who cared but improvements were needed to get the corporate core correct in areas such as customer responsiveness, resident responsiveness, Councillor responsiveness, customer service, risk, project management and performance management.

A member asked why the forward plan was taking long to produce and other than the 5 key pledges, what were the other policy ambitions in the longer term. The Leader explained that a new corporate plan would be in place by February historically, that was an achievement. The policies would focus on putting residents first, delivering our basic services correctly such as the refuse collection – garden and food waste. He informed the committee that a new director of environment had been appointed and a new Budget, policies and plans would be put in place.

A member asked of newly introduced fly tipping measures in Harrow, what was the expected percentage reductions in the short and longer term. The Leader explained that he was very wary about committing to rates at this stage as it would be measured later. He informed the committee that repeat offending sites were being monitored and new enforcement teams were in place. A new dashboard that would show location of these sites to everyone with bulky waste collection was being developed. Access to the recycling centre and the dump was being improved. CCTV cameras would be added that would monitor the sites. There were plans to invest the proceeds from the crime act into enforcement. All These would be in a plan cabinet to approve, and the scrutiny committee would be kept informed.

A member then asked if the five approved CIL products projects now go ahead in this financial year such as the installation of five more planning command posts that allows for CCTV usage.

The Leader explained that all projects are being reviewed so he was reluctant to commit to anything until then, but the project sounded like it should be implemented immediately. All plans to help fly tipping and rejuvenate the high street would be considered.

A Member asked about antisocial behaviour in the bar, for young people and how the high fear of crime in the borough would be tackled. The Leader explained that the Council had to deal with crime and the perception of a crime. He informed the committee that there were ongoing discussions with the Metropolitan police as they interested in engaging rebels and it was a positive sign that that the Commissioner was willing to engage with the Council.

He also said that the Council needed to look at regeneration sites and what could be put in place in terms of youth provision. As the biggest employer in the borough, the Council needed to look at schemes such as apprenticeship schemes to engage the youth. The Council was working with partners to determine what social value could be offered with an emphasis on helping young people and helping people through the cost-of-living crisis. Also the workforce strategy would help as developments would be introduced next year to ensure engagement with residents and employing local people. The

Council would look at local supply chains, and local businesses and employ predominantly local people and using every lever to give young people a career path and opportunity.

A Member then asked how was the outlook for local government funding before the recent economic turmoil, its impact considering the new Chancellor's announcements, inflation, no increase in help from the government and government departments being asked to find spending cuts by the new chancellor. The Leader explained that it was going to be tough. Harrow Council had a low level of grant and high level of Council Tax and not a good record of bidding into some of the government Schemes. Revenue Support Grant and Better Care Funding were not guaranteed but the plan was to tailor things to what government wants to pilot, focus on trying to deliver in Harrow by dealing with the local problems and making the best use resources available to us.

A Member asked what about the ongoing customer Services reviews, What the priorities were and the changes in the customer service culture and how would be financed. The Leader explained that the plan was to use channel migration move people onto the web, away from face-to-face and telephones. The web channel needs to work properly. There were currently frequent complains that issues were reported online, and nothing happened. The systems, integration and the management within the service had not delivered. The escalation process was correct, so new reporting systems were needed and more permanent management and a performance management framework to deal with any issues arising.

A member asked about the medium-term funding gaps of 16 million next year and further gaps, what percentage constraint had that put on future plans. The Leader explained that most of the 60 million. There were additional pressures that had come forward since then, such as pay inflation and inflation but the previous budget that used 14 million pounds of reserves this financial year and six million next financial year was unsustainable. Now, every manager needed to own their budget and was accountable and under very clear instructions not to overspend. Some of the customer Services improvements were not expected to cost anything. Officers just had to understand that the discipline of getting the small things right would make a huge difference.

A member asked if the Chief Executive and the Leader thought that incomplete projects were incompatible with the ethos, accountability, and objective of putting residents first, and what projects were incomplete that needed finishing off. The Leader explained that there were projects such as the regeneration programme and war memorial project that were incomplete.

The Chief Executive explained that improvement was needed in how the Council managed its projects. He said that projects which were still relevant should be identified and completed properly and if projects were no longer fit for purpose, a very clear decision, transparent decision should be made to stop the project. Adhere to strict and sound project management principles was needed.

A member asked how to ensure that Councillors and public queries get responded to within the customer survey timescales given the putting residents first policy. The leader explained that the plan was not complete because the problem needed to be understood first. However, the Council needed to be clear about service standards in the customer services strategy to ensure that issues were reported correctly on the website and the right back office and staff competence. This would be done through staff training, and introduction of appraisals with customer service expectation and targets built into employment contracts.

A Member asked if there were any plans to enhance the leisure offer in the borough, either through public or private investment, given physical activity had significant impact on health, obesity and also mental health. The Leader explained that yes, but this had to be developed alongside regeneration. He said that it was scheduled for consideration in either 2027 or 2028. He informed the committee that the Council must look at how to use our parks more effectively and some of the outdoor leisure opportunities as there was a massive demand for leisure space, this plan would be included in the regeneration programme.

He said The Council had a good relationship with our trade unions though the relationship was not working particularly well with at least one of our trade unions towards the end of the previous administration, it was actually the trade unions who raised the issue about having appraisals and not proposals with me. David Ashton has been appointed to work with unions and the leader would have regular meetings with union and GB as well as we go forward. They represent the key bits of our workforce and in order to deliver any of the workforce engagement plans.

A Member asked about the budget deficit if there were any specific quick wins that the Chief Executive or the Leader could announce publicly. The Leader explained that with Interim vacancies if a post was vacant for six months and there was difficulty filling the post, but you been coping without that, unless it's a massively important role such as social worker or role of that nature, you would want to get an interim in hold it. Also plans to use the apprenticeship levy. This was not about cheap labour but about bringing fresh, blood, fresh ideas and that training through the place.

A Member asked how staff morale could be described at present. The Leader explained that staff morale was very high and must be maintained. The Council needed to invest, train, and develop staff. He informed the committee that the feedback on staff on The Hub was that it was a very nice, comfortable meeting space.

He said that having everyone based in one place was part of the accommodation strategy. People were glad to be back to the office, some people enjoyed the flexibility of being able to work from home and opportunities that gave them spending more time with families but other people feel very isolated and very left out, especially people who were new to the organisation who had not done any bonding and team-building. Staff were being encouraged to come back and plans were in place to maximise in-people attendance while still preserving some bits of flexibility. Universally

heard good things about the teams across the organisation. Just needed to encourage and support them.

A Member asked that at Cabinet meeting on the 30 October, the Leader mentioned that £150,000 had been saved with no direct impact on residents, were there other savings. The Leader explained that Managers across the organisation had been challenged to find ways of saving money, because that enables the organisation to invest in the staff, there has been a lot of ideas. He informed the committee that some departments would be restructured to get the balance right between managers and frontline staff and the head of Paid Service would make a professional judgement on that.

A member then asked if they were going to be compulsory redundancies. The Leader explained that the budget had not been prepared so it was difficult to be certain. He said everything would be done to avoid it but until the commencement of the process it was uncertain.

A Member asked about the roll-out of conservation areas exploration in Harrow, please, and why the following three areas in Harrow Weald, North, Harrow and West Harrow were chosen. The leader explained that this was a question best referred to the Planning Committee.

A member asked how the current turbulence in the money markets will affect the Council's borrowing requirements for the regeneration programme and the good New Homes for Londoner's programme. The Leader explained that Council holds quite a lot of cash, and if the Council had to borrow more than and pay higher interest, that has would influence the viability of the scheme. He said Treasury Management was vitally important in getting that right. Our treasury management team had been trying to eke out savings, which can sometimes be quite substantial for years.

A member asked that as the head of paid service what was his opinion on the average number of hours, a perceived employee should work in an office. The Leader explained that his view was about 2.5 days. He said that part of the accommodation strategy was trying to work out both the capacity of Hub, and not just the number of desks that you can fill in but also the fire limits and all the rest as to what could be safely done. He said he was keen to keep the flexible working flexible spaces, but there were some spaces where some extra desks could be added. He said there were teams that needed to be together to function well such as social workers. For a wider discussion, he was happy initially for Scrutiny Leads to be briefed by the interim Director of Commercial Development and Community, Julian Wain.

A member asked if plans to develop the Greening Way car park, would include any council housing considering housing on the Pearl Road site and clarity on the reduction of affordable homes the last quarter. The Leader explained that as regards affordable housing, the Council was struggling to deliver more than was currently planned a lot depended on the various grants to available to the Council. He suggested that Councillor David Aston and Julian Wain, the Director of Commercial Development and Community may offer a better explanation during their attendance at Scrutiny Committee next month.

The chair thanked the Leader, Chief Executive and Councillors for attending, their presentation and detailed questions and answers and declared the meeting closed.

(Note: The meeting, having commenced at 7.00 pm, closed at 9.00 pm).

(Signed) Councillor Amir Moshenson
Chair