

Overview and Scrutiny Committee (Special)

Minutes

3 July 2023

Present:

Chair: Councillor Amir Moshenson

Councillors: June Baxter
Govind Bharadia
Graham Henson
Maxine Henson
Eden Kulig
Samir Sumaria

**In attendance
(Councillors):** Councillor Paul Osborn For Minute 3

**Apologies
received:** Councillor Dan Anderson Councillor Vipin Mithani

Absent: Harrow Youth Parliament Ms M Trivedi
Representative
Reverend P Reece

1. Attendance by Reserve Members

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

Ordinary Member

Reserve Member

Councillor Dan Anderson

Councillor Jerry Miles

2. **Declarations of Interest**

RESOLVED: To note that the following declarations of interest were made by Members at the meeting:

- Councillor Paul Osborn, the Leader, declared a disclosable non-pecuniary interest in Item 3: Question 6, in that he was appointed by the Council as a Trustee of Harrow Cycling Hub.
- Councillor Amir Moshenson, the Chair, declared a disclosable non-pecuniary interest in Item 3: Question 12 in that his son had a special needs child.

Resolved Items

3. **Question and Answer Session with the Leader of the Council and the Managing Director**

The Leader informed the committee that he was happy to have the new Managing Director Alex Dewsnap with him at this question and answer session.

1. A Member questioned that as staff had been advised at the Managing Director's staff briefing to park at the Leisure Centre at discounted rates, she wondered if the safety of female staff walking from the Council Hub to the Leisure Centre car park during the winter months had been considered.
 - The managing director explained that there was a proposal being consulted on through staff groups that would soon make its way back to corporate leadership team. A session would be held on 8 August which would consider the proposal along with a lot of issues with the Hub such as access to the site by staff who need their car for work, zoning in the building, IT issues, the booking app, and optimisation of meeting places but the safety of all staff was a paramount issue.
2. Another Member asked for further explanations about the intensive customer services academy session.
 - The Managing Director explained that this was part of the customer experience strategy, rather than telling staff to answer the phone in a particular way, instead, there would be more focus on the psychology of how to put residents first within the organisation. The aim of the session (which was developed by staff) was to show how to emotionally connect with residents and be more empathetic with responses to queries from residents. He suggested that the academy piece could be incorporated into the ongoing work of Scrutiny Leads on customer services experience.
3. The Vice-Chair commented that it had been six months since the budget and asked that given, the restricted service across the Council and other significant changes, how close was the administration in achieving the

£10m savings target and what challenges needed to be dealt with to ensure a set budget in the next financial year.

- The Managing Director explained that there had been significant growth and savings this year and an undergrowth of 500k had been offset. He admitted that it had been challenging complementing the 10% Management Savings and 5% G grade savings while avoiding a negative impact on frontline services. This had made the staff structure more streamlined. The situation was being reviewed each month by senior management. Despite some in year challenges, expectations were that the budget would balance this year although there was need to ensure that major savings had strong business and if not delivered this year would be developed to deliver next year.
 - The Leader added that this year was expected to be difficult given the scale of the savings target and the time needed to achieve it. He said that the administration was quite keen to minimise the overspend in the previous year given that the budget from the former administration was going to take £14m out of reserves and now the outturn was £6.6m. The third year would be much more challenging and that was to do with the uncertainty around funding (lack of clarity with Adult Social Care funding) but the Council had taken a prudent approach.
4. The Vice-Chair commented that Harrow was a high performing but very lowly funded. He asked that given the delay in receipt of the £10m and all the cost cutting measures already undertaken, what else could be done to ensure that Harrow would receive the needed funding and what services would be cut were the Council to run out of funds.
- The Leader explained that he did not think the Council would run out of money and nothing would be done that was not in the budget. The plan was to deliver the Medium-Term financial Strategy (MTFS) and although there may be timing issues with funds but with savings from year one, he was optimistic that it could be done. He agreed that Harrow Council had always been lowly funded and recalled how previous administrations tried to get more funds but the support grant from central government had reduced significantly and although though based on need, it was quite distorted and now complicated to calculate what one was entitled to and he hoped that national government could sort this out and give the local authorities a proper three-year settlement to aid effective financial planning and in addition provide clarity on adult social care regarding grant and revamp to enable local authorities plan effectively for the future.
5. Another Member asked if there had been any progress on a more unified cycle network as promised.
- The Leader explained that some schemes would be coming forward in a few months and efforts were being made to provide routes that would be well used but also to strike the right balance between

needed amount of cycle provision and loss of parking in the district centres as businesses rely on them. Businesses would also be challenged to provide secure cycle storage for cyclists when routes pass through stations.

6. A Member asked if the interest groups such as Harrow Cyclists would be consulted on these schemes.

- At this point, the Leader declared a disclosable non-pecuniary interest in that he was appointed by the Council as a trustee of the Harrow Cycling Hub. He confirmed that interest groups would be consulted and when pressed on timing, confirmed that consultation on the cycle route from Harrow on the Hill to West Harrow, North Harrow and then on to Pinner would commence in the next two months.

7. A Member asked if the Leader was aware that Councillors had been informed that the Police would no longer respond to residents in mental health crisis.

- The Leader informed the committee that at a meeting with Council Leaders across London, the Metropolitan Police Commissioner had explained that the police would still respond in emergency situations but there were concerns about incidents where police officers were not just responding to an incident but were having to spend an entire day with someone who was having mental health issues. They felt it was not their job and therefore not the best use of Police resources and would not aid in resourcing the plan to deliver more frontline police in the boroughs across London.
- The Member expressed concerns that it was becoming increasingly difficult for residents with mental health issues to access council services leading to the deterioration of their mental health and incidents requiring police attendance.
- The Leader said that while it was commendable that mental health was now being taken seriously, there were still massive challenges in terms of service provision. He said that the Council would try and work with its health partners and the Police to deliver a good service and that the Council was also looking to reconfigure its service, and this was expected to go live this month and although all public services were facing constrained budgets, he agreed that it was important that the right person was providing the right level of support to people in mental health crisis.

8. Another Member asked that given that street cleaning, enforcement officers, and number of waste vehicles had been reduced, how was the increasing and worsening problem with fly tipping going to be dealt with as residents were complaining.

- The Leader explained that services had not been reduced. That given the scale of savings that had to be achieved for additional growth, things had to be taken out of the MTFS under a previous budget but with regards to fly tipping, the team had always struggled to get fully resourced. The new team of two had been able to accomplish more than the team of six had done as they were focusing on the fly-tipping hotspot areas. With regards to the refuse collection, he said that there had been problems with the IT system for years. It had not been fitted into all the cabs, and staff had eventually resorted to using a paper version. Investment had now been made into the system, and it had been upgraded which involved the installation of the new devices in all the cabs and staff training. The new system was rolled out to the garden waste service and the next roll out would be the residual waste service and then the recycling bin service. The rollout was done in the order of priority to target areas where there were challenges with the service. He said that missed bin collection was not a resourcing issue but was more of a management, training and technology issue. In response to further questions regarding the effectiveness of the two-man team, the leader confirmed that data proved they were more effective than the six-member team.
 - The Managing Director also explained that using data to make decisions was the new norm given that new advancement in technology such as AI was rapid at the moment and not that the Council would ever invest in cutting edge technology, but the opportunity to use the technology and data to do things differently could not be overlooked. The Council would need to see where artificial intelligence was going, not that it would be let loose on all the systems at this stage, but the fact was that it had to be part of the solution going forward, even if it was not next year, then certainly in the near future.
9. The Chair asked if the two roles (Fly tipping) were fully financed from the 600% increase in revenue made in fly-tipping fines over the previous year
- The leader said that they were, and this meant this was a fully sustainable solution.
10. A Member asked what more could be done to fulfil the Council's responsibility as a corporate parent.
- The Managing Director explained that one of the flagships actions the corporate plan was finding more employment opportunities for the Council's Looked After Children. Although not everyone would want to go into local government but were skills and experience across the organisation that could be used in mentoring and skills exchange and a lot could be done at the margins to support Looked After Children. He said that there were some really good examples as to how the Council's corporate parenting had made a difference, such as with

university placements but he was keen for the organisation, to explore if there was more that could be done.

- The Leader said that from a safety point of view, the Council needed to make sure Harrow kids were safe and looked after properly. Historically, there had been a challenge around school attendance which had improved. He was very pleased that significant progress had been made with the virtual school and other programmes to get that attendance rate significantly improved. He was instrumental and actually enjoyed setting up that flagship action because he believed that the opportunity to intern was not necessarily available to people in the care system. As corporate parents the Council needed to step into that world both to help Harrow children in care to find work experience, placements and internships within the Council and also work with other partners, such as the North-West London, ICB and other employers to encourage them to help Harrow Looked After Children.

11. A Member asked for further explanations about the corporate scorecard.

- The leader explained that they were improvement boards where the Cabinet Members, the Leader and senior officers would go through the performance of individual departments, and feed that through into the corporate scorecard, which would come to cabinet every quarter and would be shared with the Performance and Finance Scrutiny Sub-Committee and all Scrutiny Leads. He said that had been effective in highlighting issues and driving up performance such as the staff mandatory training that went up from 30% completion rate to 90%. The Council now had a public scorecard, so people could see what was being monitored at a corporate level. Also, at Cabinet meetings the Leader of the Opposition was now able to ask questions. Though this was started by the last administration.

12. Another Member asked why there were not sufficient places for children with special needs especially children with disabilities in Harrow.

- The Managing Director explained that the council had applied for a new school, but work needed to be done to extend the number of places available within existing school. He acknowledged the high demand for places was a challenge regionally and nationally and the relevant team in the council was looking at all options to try and resolve this.
- The Leader further explained that the Council was looking to increase the provision in Bowes by both rebuilding the school but also making some modifications to the existing school and had also increased the amount of money that was going to the high needs block to try and address the issue. He said that this was a real challenge, but the Council was not giving up on getting an additional special needs school and were looking into other ways of achieving this such as working with neighbouring boroughs to come up with a different bid

or a different proposal on what could be done in the short term to increase provision.

- The Member suggested that the Council could try and build an independent /free school to address this issue. The Leader suggested that it would be helpful if Scrutiny could explore all options and make recommendations on what could be done. He advised that the relevant officers could explore the free school option and make recommendations.
- Members were keen to do this. At this point, the Chair declared a disclosable non-pecuniary interest in that his son had special needs. He said that he would leave the decision of whether to explore the suggestion further to the rest of the committee.

13. A Member commented on the Leader's earlier concern about the Adult and Social Care Service and asked about the impact of the deletion of middle manager's posts on frontline social care service provision.

- The leader explained that considering budgetary constraints, discussions were held at length with the director of adult services, corporate director, and director of children's services. It was the professional view of officers that there were too many layers of management in the former structure. He felt that the present structure would create more career paths for social workers and provide much needed protection for frontline staff.
- The Managing Director informed the committee that the proposal a good and robust one to start off within both services but was still subject to staff consultation which would be completed in the autumn. He believed that staff consultations were important as better ideas may emerge to enhance the proposal.
- The Member said he found it hard to believe that the cuts would lead to a better service. The leader explained that the Council's budget was a challenge given 10 % inflation and that since council tax had been raised to the highest level possible without a referendum, there was nothing else to do except face the financial realities and be smarter with money. Inflation was falling but not as fast as was expected and would continue to put pressure on the budget for the foreseeable future.
- The Vice-Chair explained that the middle management team were introduced in a restructure to ensure that the checks and balances were in place around decision making and the support for frontline staff to even out the burden rather than having one person trying to deal with 15 cases from social work frontline social workers and reviewing all the cases. This was highlighted within the Ofsted report a few years ago and the adult social care by CQC. All stated that the structure showed a very clear decision-making process, checks and balances, making sure nothing would go wrong. So, hence the

concern that by reducing that management structure quite significantly, the £1m budget savings was going to have a major impact on the frontline service and something could go wrong and wondered how long this new structure would be tested before implementation.

- The Leader explained that Children's and Adult Services area was heavily regulated and a visit from Ofsted was expected by next year who would want assurance about the service and furthermore, the new interim Director of Children's services was very good and had a safeguarding background and a good track record. He felt that ultimately if the Council was doing something unsafe, DPS or DAS would make a declaration and stop it, but they were comfortable with the changes and had even made suggestions. The changes were subject to consultation and equality assessments before implementation the Council would ensure that it was providing the absolute safest service imaginable.
 - The Managing Director said that the changes were not just about a restructure but part of transformative model - the Family Hub Model - which was not based on what the staff were used to but on partnership assessment, the model had a multi-agency approach, especially to early intervention. The multi-agency safeguarding model launched at the Gayton Road Service three months ago, integrated housing, children's and adult services with other partners. The joint target area inspection highlighted a couple of issues in the first week which was unfortunate but ultimately this was about a transformative model of delivering the service as well as supporting the Council's saving initiatives.
 - The Vice-Chair asked if the consultation response highlighted that the proposed structure was not safe, this meant that the savings £1m would not be implemented and this would leave a significant gap in the budget. The Leader agreed that the Council would have to find other savings to compensate since using the reserves was not sustainable long-term solution, He agreed that if after the consultation, a better proposal emerged, he would be happy to explore more novel ways of doing this or the proposal.
14. The Vice-Chair asked about the free collection DIY based and the separation of waste cardboard paper, bottles, glass and metals. He asked that as investments had already been made, how much of the change would the Council still implement considering that the system as already failing on a regular basis as was evidenced by the growing number of complaints.
- The leader responded that although he accepted that there had been a lot of complaints, data showed that the Council was doing better (bin collection ratio and lower missed bin rate) than other neighbouring boroughs. The complaints indicated that bins were being missed multiple times over a few months. He said that this was

unacceptable. He agreed that there were existing challenges with the paper-based system, but the Council needed to deliver the changes in this area and adapt its services accordingly as this would soon be the law.

15. A Member asked for update on the planned restructure.

- The Managing Director explained that the organisational design authority, which was a team of senior staff supported by the HR department where a set of principles were applied to the different structures to determine the best structure. Consultation would soon begin on some of the proposals. Although the proposals may end up being changed as a result of the staff consultation, but they are well thought through and robust.
- The Leader said that it was important that the process was fair and transparent as a previous restructure had been traumatic for the organisation. He felt that any restructure on this level was likely to be difficult and traumatic. He and the Managing Director were keen to ensure proper consultation and a fair, open and transparent process so that people would not feel victimised or not heard but then reason for the restructure was the need to adapt to the budget situation and install the right and affordable level of management.

16. A member asked if compulsory redundancies were ruled out.

- The leader explained that this was difficult to answer as the Council did not have the new structure yet, but the Council would always seek to redeploy staff and there were appropriate processes for that. Also, there were a quite a number of agency and interim staff and this fact might negate the need for compulsory redundancies.
- The Managing Director explained that the Council would have to notify DWP Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) if the council was thinking of reducing staffing levels. Redundancies would depend on the service area. If an area had a large agency group in a part of the service, then redundancies could be avoided because the agency staff would leave but if this was not the case in another service area, if the roles were reduced, then redundancies would be inevitable. He informed the committee that a fund had been set aside this financial year to support redundancies on the basis that was the sensible thing to do, but obviously as the Council had a responsibility to minimise redundancies, there were HR policies and processes that would enable the Council to do that. Also, he said that there may be other roles in other parts of the organisation where people could move into if that was the sensible thing to do to avoid the redundancy. But he could not say that there would be no redundancies as business cases for a few had already been signed it was the right decision to allow the specific staff involved to leave on the basis of the forthcoming restructure.

17. The Vice-Chair commented that there was an economic crisis taking place and this was reversing the buy-to-let market and people were being hammered by increase in rents of between 10% and 20% because of the increases in mortgage. He reminded the committee that the Council had a statutory responsibility to get involved 56 days before an eviction /potential close end of contract dates. He asked if the Leader was planning to reinforce the housing team as other changes were expected by end of September which would have a bigger impact on the team and the team was already not responding quickly enough to the current crisis.

- The Leader explained that the service had done quite well in terms of its target in preventing homelessness, in fact it was well ahead of the target at about 70% in terms of actions to prevent homelessness, he agreed that it was absolutely critical the Council does everything to help people avoid homelessness and although the Council was in a constrained financial environment, he had asked the Director of Housing to look at what could be done to avoid putting people into bed and breakfast accommodation and make temporary accommodation much better. He said that based on this, there may be a strong business case for the Council taking on a property, portfolio rather than putting people in bed and breakfast but the business case for this was in the early stages of development. He was very keen to ensure the Council would provide good temporary accommodation to the largest extent within the Borough.

18. A Member asked if the public attendance at the property open council committee meetings had decreased since the movement to Harrow Council Hub and wondered if the opening on Kenmore Avenue entrance on Committee nights had been helpful.

- The Leader answered that he had not noticed any change in terms of physical attendance because few people attend council meetings. Attendance was usually better at planning committee meetings and that post COVID, people were more likely to make representations online.

The Chair thanked the Leader and the Managing Director for their attendance and detailed answers.

(Note: The meeting, having commenced at 6.30 pm, closed at 7.37 pm).

(Signed) Councillor Amir Moshenson
Chair

