

Cabinet – 15 February 2024

Minute Extract from the Overview and Scrutiny Committee – 9 January 2024

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

The Chair welcomed the Leader of the Council, the Portfolio Holder for Finance and Human Resources, as well as the Managing Director to the meeting. This would be a Question and Answer session in accordance with Committee Procedure Rules 43 and 44.

Questions on the Draft Revenue Budget 2024/25 and draft Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) to 2026/27 could be asked as well as on other issues.

The Leader explained that the draft revenue budget for 2024/25 and draft Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) to 2026/27 would be submitted to Cabinet again in February 2024 for final approval and recommendation to Council.

Members asked if the uncertainty of not having a multi-year financial funding commitment for adult social care from central Government made planning challenging, and whether longer term funding from Government had been requested.

The Committee were advised that it would be preferable to have a 3-4 year commitment for adult social care to be certain that it would continue to receive funding for that time-frame. Other Councils in London were equally concerned. Furthermore, there was a need to balance funding for inner-London and outer-London boroughs.

Members inquired about the funding formula, whether Harrow was getting an appropriate amount to match its needs and what discussions were being held with central Government on revising the funding formula.

The Committee were advised that there was need to revise the funding formula to consider actual needs in Harrow, as the current model was outdated and did not reflect the needs in the borough. Furthermore, as far

back as 15 years ago, discussions had been held with central Government but nothing much had changed. Harrow remained one of the lowest funded Councils both within London and nationally. The Council did not benefit from large reserves compared with the rest of London and was in the lower end of the lower quartile for reserve balances held. The Leader and senior Council officers continued to hold discussions with ministers and civil servants on revising the funding formula.

Members wanted to know what the biggest risks were to the Draft Revenue Budget 2024/25 and draft Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) to 2026/27, and how any unexpected expenditure would affect the budget.

The Committee were advised that the three biggest risks were: adult social care; children's care; and homelessness. All were demand-led and therefore it was difficult to predict what changes would occur in the future. Moreover, the borough was likely to have an Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) inspection during the year, which could have a further impact on the Council if there was an adverse change in the Council's judgement. Furthermore, the Council did not receive specific funding to meet demographic growth and demand-led pressures. In addition, inflation had increased substantially and this created unfunded budget pressures.

Members wanted to know what discussions had been held with central Government to protect statutory services if there were more demands on finances and some services were to be cut.

The Committee were advised that the Leader and senior management team continued to hold discussions with ministers and senior civil servants on the need to protect statutory services with increased funding. Furthermore, Members of Parliament representing Harrow constituencies were lobbied to present the borough's issues to ministers.

Members asked about installing more electric charging points and pothole mending.

The Committee were advised that 200 extra on-street charging points would be installed, including 10 ultra charging ones. Resources had been allocated for pothole mending in the borough.

Members requested an update on the active transport strategy.

The Committee were advised that the strategy was out for consultation. It was envisaged that more cycle lanes and routes would be opened. However, it was important to consult residents as such measures would impact on traffic flow in Harrow.

Members wanted to know how fly-tipping in Harrow, particularly in South Harrow, was being addressed and whether better enforcement could stop the problem.

The Committee were advised that a new borough-wide enforcement Public Spaces Protection Order (PSPO) was due to take effect to deal with persistent anti-social behaviour, which was detrimental to the community's quality of life. Furthermore, it had been established that the waste being dumped was mostly house-hold, implying it most likely came from unlicensed Houses of Multiple Occupation (HMOs), without sufficient bin capacity. Enforcement of HMOs would therefore be enhanced to clamp down on illegal ones.

Members were concerned about the effect of homelessness on children and questioned whether the Council had houses where homeless families could go when declared homeless.

The Committee were advised that there were houses that homeless families could utilise. There was a lack of adequate supply but increased demand, which meant that some families were housed in temporary accommodation and hotels.

Members asked about the "Right To Buy Back" (RTBB) scheme from the Mayor.

The Committee were advised that "Right To Buy Back" scheme was a historic fund through the Greater London Authority. This was to buy back ex-council properties sold under RTBB. Properties had to be completed by March 2023.

It was further advised that an update would be provided after the meeting.

Members wanted to know if the Special Educational Needs (SEN) transport review had been completed, and whether a SEN school would be established in Harrow to reduce the cost of transporting students to facilities outside the borough. The use of taxis in transporting SEN students was increasing, and this could be reduced by having a local SEN school.

The Committee were advised that SEN transport was still being reviewed, and proposals had been submitted for a SEN facility in Harrow to the Department for Education.

Members queried the household support fund which would end in March 2024, and whether this would be extended.

The Committee were advised that the Council was lobbying for the fund to continue beyond March 2024 – preferably for another year. However, it was important to recognise that the scheme would end at some point.

The Chair thanked the Leader of the Council, the Portfolio Holder for Finance and Human Resources, as well as the Managing Director, for their attendance and responses.

RESOLVED: That the Committee's comments be forwarded to Cabinet for consideration.

For Consideration

Background Documents:

Minutes of Overview and Scrutiny Committee – 9 January 2024

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