

Meeting:	Overview and Scrutiny Committee
Date:	29 th January 2007
Subject:	Report of the Scrutiny Budget Challenge Panel
Key Decision: (Executive-side only)	No
Responsible Officer:	Paul Najsarek, Director People, Performance and Policy
Portfolio Holder:	ClIr David Ashton, Portfolio Holder, Finance and Business Matters
Exempt:	No
Enclosures:	Report of the Scrutiny Budget Challenge Panel

SECTION 1 – SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This report accompanies the report of the scrutiny budget challenge panel held on 18th December 2006.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Councillors are requested to:

- Note the report of the challenge panel
- Agree the findings and recommendations.
- Refer the report on to Cabinet for consideration as part of the budget setting process

SECTION 2 - REPORT

Brief Background

This report introduced the findings of the scrutiny budget challenge panel. Scrutiny has a key role to play in supporting effective budget planning. The budget challenge panel engaged scrutiny councillors, portfolio holders and officers in a round table discussion of the particular financial challenges facing the council at this point in time. The challenge panel's report, attached, summarises their findings and the recommendations they would make to Cabinet to ensure

Issue to be determined

Scrutiny councillors are asked to endorse the findings of the panel and agree the recommendations

Options considered

Not relevant to this report

Option recommended and reasons for recommendation

Not relevant to this report

Resources, costs and risks associated with recommendation

There are none associated with this report

Implications if recommendations rejected

If the reports recommendations are rejected the Overview and Scrutiny committee will have lost the opportunity to place on record its comments on 2007/8 – 2009/10 budget.

Staffing/workforce consideration

There are none associated with this report

Equalities Impact consideration

There are none associated with this report

Current KPI's and Likely impact of decision on KPI's

There are none associated with this report

Legal and Financial Comments

There are no legal or financial implications in the report.

Community Safety (s17 Crime & Disorder Act 1998)

There are none associated with this report

SECTION 3 - STATUTORY OFFICER CLEARANCE

Chief Finance Officer	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Name: Barry Evans
		Date: 15 th January 2007
Monitoring Officer	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Name: Stephen Dorrian
		Date: 15 th January 2007

SECTION 4 - CONTACT DETAILS AND BACKGROUND PAPERS

Contact: Lynne McAdam, Service Manager Scrutiny, 020 8420 9387

Background Papers: Revenue budget report 2007/08 – 2009/10, Cabinet 14th December

IF APPROPRIATE, does the report include the following considerations?

1.	Consultation	NO
2.	Corporate Priorities	NO
3.	Manifesto Pledge Reference Number	



December 2006

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Report of the Scrutiny Challenge Panel

Budget 2007/08

Members of the Review Group

Cllr Brian Gate (Chairman)
Cllr Thaya Idaikkadar
Cllr Salim Miah
Cllr Chris Noyce
Cllr Bill Stephenson
Cllr Anthony Seymour
Cllr Mark Versallion

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The challenge panel would like to thank the following councillors and council officers for the time they contributed to the panel's deliberations and for their constructive and candid engagement in the panel's deliberations:

Cllr David Ashton, Deputy Leader; Cllr Marilyn Ashton, Portfolio Holder Planning, Development and Enterprise; Cllr Camilla Bath, Portfolio Holder Housing; Cllr Christine Bednell, Portfolio Holder Lifelong Learning, Cultural Services and Issues Facing Older People; Cllr Eileen Kinnear, Urban Living - Community Safety and Public Realm; Cllr Chris Mote, Leader; Cllr Janet Mote, Portfolio Holder People First - Children's Services; Cllr Eric Silver, Portfolio Holder Adult Community Care Services and Issues Facing People with Special Needs; Myfanwy Barret, Director Finance and Business Strategy; Paul Clarke, Director of Children's Service; Paula Foulds, Group Manager People First Finance; Penny Furness-Smith, Director of Community Care; Jill Rothwell, Acting Chief Executive; Andrew Trehern, Executive Director Urban Living.

This report has been compiled by the Members named on the front cover. The views expressed are solely ours.

Cllr Brian Gate, Chairman Budget Challenge Panel

INTRODUCTION

Scrutiny has an important role to play in challenging the assumptions behind the budget and supporting the executive in reaching the right decisions with regard to finances. Until this year, this challenge was delivered via the Overview and Scrutiny committee. However, this year scrutiny councillors decided to undertake this project by means of a challenge panel, as this approach was felt to be a more robust and challenging process than simply considering the document as an item on the Overview and Scrutiny committee agenda.

Challenge panels were introduced in July 2006. On many occasions – particularly when a policy is being developed – officers appreciate feedback on proposals from members. The committee environment may not be suited to this, mainly because of time constraints. Challenge panels comprise a small group of officers and members that are able to discuss a particular policy or strategy, or in this instance, preparation of the budget, more informally and in more detail. They provide an opportunity for members to provide an alternative, ‘real time’ perspective to council business, and lend additional accountability to the policy development process. This level of detailed challenge would not be possible as a single item on a packed committee agenda. The budget is a significant event, with long-term implications for the council, which merits this detailed level of consideration.

The panel took place on 18th December 2006 as a round table discussion between scrutiny councillors, executive members and council officers. At the meeting the panel was able to investigate a number of the key corporate issues relating to budget management and also used specific services to drill down and investigate the decision making process

The panel comprised:
Cllr Brian Gate (Chairman)
Cllr Thaya Idaikkadar
Cllr Salim Miah
Cllr Chris Noyce
Cllr Bill Stephenson
Cllr Anthony Seymour
Cllr Mark Versallion

The scope for the investigation was agreed by the Overview and Scrutiny committee in October and is attached as Appendix One

The panel’s findings and recommendations are included in the pages that follow.

DETAIL

Harrow Council is facing challenging financial situation. A combination of continuing poor grant settlement, increasing demand, existing shortfall and low level of reserves means that the council must find £18 million of savings in 2007/08, £6.7m in 08/09 and £7.5m in 09/10.

The panel received information from the Director of Finance and Business Strategy and the Deputy Leader of the Council on how this position has arisen and how it is being responded to. The major difficulty is the fact that the council is low spend/low grant authority – as part of a two year settlement the Council received only the minimum grant of 2% for 2006/2007 and 2.7%/£1.6m for 2007/2008. This has been compounded by a number of local pressures:

- Inflationary pressures of pay and pensions etc
- General inflationary pressures
- Impact of the cost of concessionary fares
- Increased demand for social care – Primary Care Trust decisions, government policy
- Reduced income from land charges

In addition to the current challenges, during 2004/05 and 2005/06 the council had sought to invest in particular services, funding this investment via efficiencies and new income streams. However, whilst the investment went ahead, the additional income and efficiencies did not materialise. This has meant that the council was forced to set a challenging budget for 2006/07, which identified £15m of savings. Not all of these savings were allocated and later on in 2006, additional pressures were identified and agreed. The ongoing shortfall in the budget is of particular concern in the context of the chronically low level of reserves (currently £1.8m)

For 2007/08 there is an £18m budget gap. Identifying savings to bridge the gap is difficult as only a small proportion of the overall budget (25%) is controllable – the schools and benefits budgets are ring-fenced and therefore cannot contribute to the savings plans. The proposed budget for 2007/08 closes this gap by:

- Reviewing risks and technical assumptions - £3.5m
- Directorate saving proposals - £10m
- Council tax increase (4.9%) £4.5m

In order to try to understand and respond to the budget challenge, 5 strategic savings projects were established at the beginning of 2006 and their findings have informed the budget for 2006/07. These projects considered:

- Organisational structure
- Service delivery
- Value for Money
- Land and property
- Finance

Two further projects are planned:

- An urgent review of the management structure to be completed and implemented by the end of March 2007, which it is anticipated will deliver significant savings. These savings will be incorporated into the 2007/08 budget.
- Programme of fundamental service reviews in order to help address an anticipated shortfall in £6.7m in 2008/09 and £7.5m in 2009/10.

The council is considering a number of proposals for 2007/08 to further contribute to better management of the budget.

- Addressing real social cost pressures and the impact of demand led budgets – 'Fair Access to Services' criteria will be examined to ensure their equity and consistency. Comparison will be made with other boroughs and stricter monitoring will be carried out.

- £1m per year will be contributed to the borough's reserve funds in order to safeguard against future budget shortfalls
- Fundamental service reviews and the management structure review will help to address the funding gap for 2007/8 - 10
- The council will lobby central government with local MPs with regard to the low level of government grant. This lobbying will be on the basis of the formula and will seek clarification of disparities for a long-term resolution rather than a short-term fix, e.g. the impact of diversity is not recognised in grants
- The council will also lobby, with London Councils regarding the 2.7% settlement this year
- Together with the Harrow Strategic Partnership and London Councils, the council will take a firm stance with regard to the Primary Care Trust's decisions to manage its budgets by redefining eligibility for continuing care.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The text in paragraphs that follow identify those areas in which the scrutiny budget challenge panel endorses the activity proposed by the executive. The panel also makes the following additional recommendations:

1. The executive adopts a flexible and balanced approach to setting of council tax and targets for reserves in order to safeguard service delivery
2. Whilst proposals to increase external funding to the Council are welcome, a strategic approach is encouraged to minimise duplication and additional demands on staff, recognising that this approach is greatly determined by the Government's disparate and target-driven funding regime.
3. The programme of fundamental service reviews adopt an efficiencies/best value-based approach to their investigations
4. The proposed procurement transformation project considers the following possible options as part of its brief:
 - Shared services
 - Strategic partnerships
 - Super-procurement bodies
5. The proposed increased use of direct payments is coupled with safeguards particularly with regard to assessment of need, statement of needs, supporting service users to make appropriate choices and monitoring of care providers
6. As a part of the review of eligibility criteria, comparative research is undertaken to ensure that Harrow people are not treated less favourably than residents in similar authorities
7. The executive and senior management of the council identify and consider 'best practice' with regard to managing demand-led budgets
8. The executive and senior management of the council makes use of the support that can be provided by a number of other scrutiny projects:
 - **Demography review**– with regard to evidence for the purpose of lobbying central government and for managing demand-led budgets
 - **Standing scrutiny review of procurement** – to support the work regarding improved procurement processes
 - **Reviews of cultural services and obesity** – with regard to the potential preventative work that could be done to reduce demands made on local organisations by a future ageing population
 - **Standing Scrutiny Review of NHS Finances** – with regard to ongoing support from executive and senior managers to ensure the council is able to champion the needs of local people by holding local health care bodies to account
9. The executive and senior management continue to investigate the potential for income generation by identifying possible areas in which charges can be levied against local organisations.
10. The Deputy Leader and Director of Finance and Business Strategy provide the Overview and Scrutiny Committee with an update on the budget position at its next meeting on 29th January 2007

FINDINGS

The panel is pleased to note that, whilst urgent savings must be delivered to secure the financial future of the organisation, the executive and senior management of the council is developing a strategic approach to the delivery of these savings and the future financial viability of the organisation. We have grouped these arrangements and commented on them under the following titles.

Council Tax, Services and Reserves

The panel wished to investigate the balance that this budget is striking between council tax, service levels and reserves. We were concerned that in the light of the serious budget difficulties, the new administration would set one of these as a priority over the others and it seemed to the panel that a balanced approach to these individual components of the budget, at a particularly difficult time for the council and residents, is absolutely critical. Whilst on the one hand, the council tax needs to be set at a realistic level which will support the delivery of services to our residents, we are also of the view that the tax must be set at a reasonable level in a borough which already experiences comparatively high levels of taxation – higher than the London average. Similarly, whilst we recognise the need to replenish the council's reserve fund as, at its current level it is dangerously low, we would like this need to be balanced again to ensure that service delivery to local people can be safeguarded.

The panel was advised of proposals to increase the council tax by 4.9% in 07/08, 3% in 08/09 and 0% in 09/10 and to increase the level of reserves by £1m per year for the next 4 – 6 years in order to reach a target of between £5m - £7m. The agreed minimum level of reserves (as identified in the 06/07 budget) is £3.5m. These decisions are encouraging and the panel was pleased to hear from the Deputy Leader that an increase in the level of council tax had been decided upon as it had become increasingly clear that to increase the tax by *anything less* than the 4.9% in 2007/08 would have had significantly damaging impact on services and would have resulted in unpalatable reductions on service levels. Whilst recognising the need to reduce the tax burden on local people, the panel would hope that the executive would have a flexible approach to future tax increase in so far as, should it become apparent that the proposed 3% and zero rises in 2008 – 2010 could have a similarly damaging impact on services, these will be reviewed. The panel would also hope that rather than pursuing a zero rise council for the future as matter of principle, the executive might consider using increased funding generated through council tax rises to reinstate some of the cuts proposed in the 2007/08 budget.

Again, it is clear that the council's position with regard to reserves is untenable. As the Deputy Leader pointed out, had the tornado that hit neighbouring Brent in December 2006 crossed Harrow's borders, the impact upon the council's financial viability could have been devastating. However, the panel again feels that the reserves must be replenished in balance with the delivery of services and would thus urge a flexible and considered approach by the executive when setting the target for the level of reserves.

Grant levels

The panel shares the concerns of the Deputy Leader and the Director of Finance and Business Strategy regarding Harrow's position with regard to grant funding. The level of funding that the council has secured has historically been very poor and we fully endorse the efforts proposed by the executive to try to address this. In particular we welcome the proposals to lobby along with other London boroughs, for an improved London deal. We also endorse the proposal to lobby for greater recognition to be given to the impact of diversity and the needs of transient populations in the grant formula. The executive should use the evidence generated by the scrutiny review of demography to support this lobbying position.

We are also please to see that the council will be increasing efforts to identify and exploit as many funding sources as possible. However we would recommend that a strategic and co-ordinated approach to this be adopted to ensure that there is no duplication of effort, that time is not wasted pursuing pointless areas of funding and that it does not create additional pressures on an already over-extended workforce.

Efficiencies

Income generation/grant funding, whilst important is not the only means by which the council should address financial difficulties. The council must address some of the more fundamental issues of efficiencies that might improve the budget position and overall performance. It is clear that a number of the proposals being considered by the executive are focusing on a more strategic approach and the panel welcomes this more measured/evidence-based approach to securing reduced costs. In this context the panel offers the following observations/comments.

- **Programme of fundamental service reviews** – We would urge that the proposed fundamental service review programme adopt an efficiencies-based approach to its deliberations, investigating how service delivery can be improved through smarter working and more efficient use of resources to deliver long-term strategic improvements to service provision. The panel, on behalf of the Overview and Scrutiny committee would welcome sight of the terms of reference for these reviews and would also offer scrutiny support to this programme as appropriate.
- **Shared services** – the Deputy Leader made reference to proposals for the collective provision of transport services and commented that discussions are underway between NW London Chief Executives to investigate the feasibility of this. The panel notes this as an interesting proposal and would recommend that the council identify other services that could be provided on a cross-borough basis. This may be something that the proposed procurement transformation project could consider. It is also something that could be monitored via Overview and Scrutiny committee's standing review of procurement.
- **Smart procurement** – the panel was advised of opportunities for procuring savings through strategic partnerships. In particular, and following the example of the strategic partnership with Accord MP, the Executive Director of Urban Living cited the possibility of further savings accruing from similar strategic partnerships. Again this is something that could be considered by the proposed procurement transformation partnership.
- **Direct Payments** – the panel heard that the council is considering providing cash to service users to purchase transport and generally promoting the use of direct payments by residents. This is a prudent suggestion and is an area in which the council's performance could be improved. However, we would suggest that care be taken, whilst encouraging choice and potentially securing savings, to protect vulnerable service users by:
 - ensuring that detailed and accurate assessment of need are undertaken and clear statement of this need are provided
 - supporting service users in their decision-making process and
 - monitoring the quality of the care being purchased.
- **Staffing** – the panel was advised of the need for the council to have a fundamental rethink of its structures, in particular the proposal to review the management structure of the organisation. Whilst this may be timely, particularly in the light of the programme of fundamental service reviews, the panel would seek reassurance that the lessons of the MMR have been taken into account in order that this review is delivered as constructively as possible. In the context of this review and of the overall reduction in staffing levels, the panel would encourage the executive and senior management of the council to ensure that the viability of the organisational structure is maintained and that staff reconfigurations do not put at risk the council's statutory responsibilities.

Demand-led budgets

Demand-led services, in particular social care services, have the potential to create significant pressure on a number of the council's budgets. The panel heard of a number of instances where a single case has massively distorted a budget. The activities of the Primary Care Trust in redefining the criteria for continuing care has been a significant contributor to such pressures – these are discussed in more detail below. Despite unpredictability in these areas, the council must consider how this can be managed and a number of options were put to the panel.

We were interested to hear about the review of eligibility criteria for adult services, in particular the proposal to introduce a more consistent process to address current weaknesses that suggest that the assessment of need depends upon who undertakes the assessment. We recognise that in the interest of equity it is important that there is consistency in assessment and welcome the proposals to ensure this happens. We also applaud the efforts of the Director of Community Care in identifying financial resources to train staff to improve their assessment skills and achieve this consistency.

We are concerned however, that the criteria are to be toughened and that only those assessed as having 'critical' needs will in future be eligible to receive services. The panel feels that this removes the authority's potential to undertake preventative work thus inevitably increasing the number of people whose conditions deteriorate. We are also concerned that provision of services at the 'heavy' end is more expensive in the longer-term – effectively this decision is simply putting off the inevitable of more expensive implications further down the line. We acknowledge that the executive is aware of these potential contradictions. Bearing in mind the stated concerns regarding the toughening of the criteria, we welcome the executive's proposal to undertake further work regarding the operation of eligibility criteria in other boroughs to ensure Harrow residents are not unfairly treated in comparison.

We would also suggest that there may be useful learning to gather from those authorities that have managed to address some of the unpredictability of demand led services, the impact of these services has been felt in a number of boroughs and it is probable that there is useful experience that could benefit the authority's management of these budgets.

There may also be benefit from forming 'super procurement' bodies to secure best value from contract for demand-led services. Again this might be something that the proposed procurement transformation project could address.

We would also draw to the executive's attention the potential for the work of the demography review to inform future service planning and help minimise at least some of the unpredictability of demand-led services.

Income Generation

During the panel's deliberations a number of comments were made about generating income. For instance greater efforts should be made to access European and Government funds. This has been done successfully in other councils and last year by a dedicated fundraiser in People First. A number of comments were made regarding the possibility of generating income by charging realistic prices for services that were currently provided on a subsidised or free basis. This is in relation contract/block services rather than for individuals, for example, schools. The panel considers this is something that should be explored further but would suggest that an appropriate level of charges must be found in order that there will be sufficient uptake and to ensure that they do not damage other Council objectives such as working in partnership. The Director of Children's Services informed the panel of experiments in Kent and Rotherham of delivering the advisory services through an educational trust. This could lead to a more efficient and cost-effective service that was more attuned to what schools wanted. The panel would recommend that the council consider the results of these experiments and their applicability to Harrow. The panel would also recommend that the council investigate the possibility for charging in other areas of contract/block service provision.

Partners

PCT funding

A significant concern for the council is the Primary Care Trust's decision to address some of its own financial difficulties by redefining the eligibility criteria for continuing care and thus 'shunting' the costs for the care of some of the most vulnerable residents in the borough onto the council. The panel deplores this behaviour, not simply because of the impact on the council's own budget but most significantly because of the potentially devastating impact this can have on those most dependent upon the health and social care facilities in the borough. We fully support the executive's proposal to take a firm stance in challenging the decisions of the Primary Care Trust through the Harrow Strategic Partnership and London Councils.

We would also draw the executive's and senior managers' attention to the Scrutiny Standing Review Group of NHS Finances that has been established to:

- 'review the effectiveness of respective financial recovery plans;
- receive regular financial updates from the respective Chief Executives on the delivery of these plans;
- consider strategic proposals of the trusts
- gather evidence of the specific experiences of local people; and
- investigate the impact of financial difficulties at the interface between health and social care'¹

On behalf of the Overview and Scrutiny committee, the panel would recommend that the executive and senior managers of the council continue to participate in this project to ensure that scrutiny's statutory function to hold NHS bodies to account on behalf of local people is carried out to the best effect.

Preventative work

We were pleased to hear from the Portfolio Holder Lifelong Learning, Cultural Services and Issues Facing Older People that the council is adopting a definition of older people as those over the age of 50. A focus on this group of people by the council and our partners could go some way to reducing the demands of the older population in years to come. It will however necessitate smart thinking by both organisations at what is a critical financial time for us in order to ensure services are put in place. Again, investment in this area can have some significant longer term benefits, short term reductions will potentially have some longer term costs. In this context, on behalf of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee the panel would draw the executive's attention to the scrutiny reviews of cultural services and obesity.

Ongoing management

Perhaps the most important, and obvious, recommendation that the panel would like to make to the executive is that monitoring of the budget outturn and the potential and actual implications of any changes is an integral part of their regular business. The impact of potential difficulties if identified early enough, can be minimised. We welcome the reassuring comments made by the Director of Finance and Business Strategy and the Deputy Leader in this context and would encourage them to ensure that this monitoring and ongoing management of the budget situation is maintained. We would also invite the Director of Finance and Business Strategy and the Deputy Leader to provide an update of the budget situation to the next meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 29th January 2007.

¹ Scope for the Scrutiny Standing Review of NHS Finances

CONCLUSION

This is a difficult time for Harrow Council. We are facing a significant financial challenge, the resolution of which can have long-term consequences for the borough and its residents. We have welcomed the opportunity to meet with the executive to discuss their proposed budget and hope that the observations that we have made are helpful.

The panel would again like to thank the members of the executive and senior management of the council for their honest assessment of the difficulties that face the council.

Members of the Scrutiny Budget Challenge Panel.

APPENDIX ONE

SCOPE FOR THE BUDGET CHALLENGE PANEL

1	SUBJECT	Budget
2	COMMITTEE	Overview and Scrutiny Committee
3	REVIEW GROUP	To be confirmed
4	<u>AIMS/ OBJECTIVES/ OUTCOMES</u>	To challenge the assumptions behind the budget setting process and analyse the impact of changes in the budget
5	MEASURES OF SUCCESS OF REVIEW	Scrutiny panel able to input into the budget setting process
6	SCOPE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analysis of context within which the budget is being set – including policy drivers • Analysis of service finances • Investigation of particular areas of concern
7	SERVICE PRIORITIES (Corporate/Dept)	Tackling waste and giving real value for money
8	REVIEW SPONSOR	Director People, Performance and Policy
9	ACCOUNTABLE MANAGER	Director of Finance and Business Strategy
10	SUPPORT OFFICER	Service Manager Scrutiny
11	ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT	Scrutiny Review Administrator
12	EXTERNAL INPUT	External Auditor The committee might like to consider the involvement of the Open Budget Group and the cross cutting portfolio holders
13	METHODOLOGY	<p>Pre panel meeting To receive:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contextual information regarding the budget including key policy drivers • Analysis of service finance performance <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>What are the priorities</i> ○ <i>What are the 'hot spots'</i> ○ <i>How are 'hot spots' being addressed</i> ○ <i>What are the risks in the budget</i> ○ <i>How are these being addressed</i> ○ <i>Impact of previous year's budget decisions</i> ○ <i>How does service measure value for money and how does it compare.</i> • Development of specific lines of enquiry for the panel meeting <p>Panel meeting</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information from auditor re use of resources judgement • Presentation from Director of Finance and Business Strategy re context and key policy drivers • Investigation of specific lines of enquiry <p>Post panel meeting To consider evidence and formulate initial findings</p>

14	EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS	The panel should consider the impact that the budget has on equalities in its considerations
15	ASSUMPTIONS/ CONSTRAINTS	
16	SECTION 17 IMPLICATIONS	The panel should consider the impact that the budget has on section 17 responsibilities in its considerations
17	TIMESCALE	October/November 2006
18	RESOURCE COMMIMTENTS	See attached
19	REPORT AUTHOR	Panel members Service Manager Scrutiny
20	REPORTING ARRANGEMENTS	Outline of formal reporting process: To Service Director <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> When November 2006 To Portfolio Holder <input type="checkbox"/> When..... To CMT <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> When December 2006 To Cabinet <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> When January 2007
21	FOLLOW UP ARRANGEMENTS (proposals)	Annual event