

5th Jan 2007



Cabinet/Committee:	Harrow Business Consultative Forum
Date of Circulation:	January 2007
Subject:	INFORMATION REPORT – Meeting Review
Responsible Officer:	Claire Codling Strategic Planning
Portfolio Holder:	Planning and Enterprise
Exempt:	Yes

SECTION 1 – SUMMARY

FOR INFORMATION

This report suggests that the Forum review the format of future meetings to increase the engagement of the business community.

SECTION 2 - REPORT

2.1 Background

Harrow Business Consultative Forum's first meeting was held in September 2005, following agreement by Cabinet of the terms of reference in May 2005 set out below.

1. To enable consultation between the Council and representatives of local non domestic ratepayers required by Section 65 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992 and to provide information regarding the Council's expenditure proposals for the future budget in accordance with Non-Domestic Ratepayers

5th Jan 2007

(Consultation) Regulations 1992. The minutes of the meetings to be reported to the Cabinet.

2.To facilitate consultation between the Council and representatives of the business community as required by the Authority.

Despite the best endeavours of the co-ordinating officer to increase attendance at these meetings by sending out 400 invitations per meeting and providing a more varied agenda on topics that will either:

- impact on business operations e.g. Business Recovery
- or
- businesses can directly benefit from involvement in e.g. the Harrow Tourism Strategy

there has been very limited attendance at meetings apart from representatives from business intermediary organisations e.g. The NW London Chamber, Harrow in Business, the Small Business Federation and Wealdstone Traders.

The idea in extending the remit of the initial forum was to support the Best Value Review into Harrow's Economy. Although this has since been closed down, with agreement that scrutiny's role would cover this instead, many of the initiatives listed in the presentation made to the Forum in Sept 2005 by the Finance Director (enclosed as a background paper) would still benefit from greater consultation with businesses across Harrow e.g.

- Enforcement and regulatory services
- Crime Reduction
- Business rates
- Procurement and the Business Portal
- Master Planning the town centre
- Tourism

There are now also further initiatives who either need specific consultation or regular feedback from the business sector in order to ensure the service being developed is what is needed by the business community:-

- The development of a revised Economic Development Strategy focussing on Enterprise
- The possible development of a Business Improvement District in the Town Centre
- The development of incubator provision to help business start ups.

There is a further major driver behind improving engagement with businesses in that 'Building a better relationship with business' is one of the Conservative administration's election pledges, and is one of the themes being taken forward under the corporate priority – Getting Harrow Moving.

5th Jan 2007

Currently Harrow Council is operating under severely constrained financial circumstances and this is likely to continue for at least a further two years. It also needs to be acknowledged that apart from the statutory consultation meeting on NDDR, that business liaison is one of the few discretionary services, so that any changes to meetings will need to be carried out at nil cost to the Council.

Individual services within the council do in addition to the Business Consultative Forum hold separate specific events to promote their services/ new initiatives e.g. a private Landlords Forum and this will need to continue. However if the BCF was a larger group with a cross section of businesses regularly attending it could be used more fully as a mechanism for sounding out and getting feedback from businesses on services provided on a regular basis, and could save time and resources for both the Council and businesses.

There has already been some discussion as to how meetings might be further changed to increase interest from the business community, holding breakfast meetings, taking meetings to other venues, being an agenda item at an existing business meeting.

It perhaps also needs to be acknowledged that attending Harrow Council meetings maybe a rather low priority for many businesses who are heavily preoccupied with running their businesses. Therefore there is a need to look at harnessing other opportunities to gain feedback from the business community in their interaction with Harrow Council such as email registration when businesses use the web site and business portal.

It is proposed that, apart from the annual February NDDR consultation meeting that the format of meetings is changed and other alternative approaches are trialed e.g. 'a question time approach' with the Leader or events could be themed. The possibility of reworking, and reconvening, the annual business debate or local business awards, if sponsorship can be found and so to provide real networking opportunities for businesses in Harrow could also be looked into.

However any event must also be developed to provide opportunities for both feedback on existing services and initiatives and awareness raising of new initiatives and changes to regulations.

This paper is being tabled as an information item with the intention of encouraging members, and the businesses and the intermediaries present to discuss this with business networks and return to the next meeting to agree a plan for increasing business engagement with Harrow Council. Further ideas to be explored, should be emailed to ccodling@harrow.council.co.uk. By 28th February 2007. A draft action plan will then be drafted and circulated prior to the next meeting, with an accompanying report and recommendations.

5th Jan 2007

SECTION 3 – FURTHER INFORMATION

The Business Mapping research, March 2006, included not just contacting the small businesses in the area but also 17 of the 42 organisations employing more than 200. The survey used was based on one carried out in 2002. The results show a slight decline in satisfaction with Harrow from several of these larger businesses and organisations. It has already been agreed with the Leader and deputy leader that a small network should be set up to enable direct contact at Leader and CE level. It is expected that the first meeting of this group will be in March 2007.

Please note a formal consultation will be carried out separately on the new strategy, 'Enterprising Harrow' which will include the business community.

Please also note that a short review of the management and directorate structure is taking place, which may mean that co-ordination of the Harrow Business Consultative Forum may move to a different directorate from April 2007.

SECTION 4 - CONTACT DETAILS AND BACKGROUND PAPERS

Contact: Claire Codling, Senior Professional, Strategic Planning, Urban Living
0208 420 9399 Report Author's name, Job Title, direct telephone number

Background Papers:

Sept 2005 presentation by Finance Director to Harrow Business Consultative Forum