

Local Government Improvement Programme

Visit to Harrow Council

3rd – 7th December 2007

Summary

Harrow Council and its partners are clearly ambitious for the borough and demonstrate a strong desire to progress further. A range of high performing, high quality and innovative services, activities and initiatives that improve the quality of people's lives in Harrow are being delivered, of which people are justifiably proud. Good progress is being made against the targets in the current Local Area Agreement.

It is widely acknowledged that the council was experiencing significant difficulties until relatively recently, including the prolonged absence of the former chief executive, other major capacity issues and a financial crisis. A clear improvement plan has been established by the new chief executive, through which the authority is focusing on the correct changes and improvements to deliver better outcomes for local people. Inevitably, given the necessarily internally-focused nature of many aspects of the improvement plan and the relatively short period of time since its inception, the external benefits in terms of the impact on service delivery and customer satisfaction have still to be secured. However, there is a clear sense of momentum in the organisation and much greater stability than before, with strong political leadership having been instrumental in achieving this. The chief executive has also played a crucial role - he is held in high regard and seen as having made a significant impact in a short period of time.

The good initial progress that has been made needs to be cemented by developing wider corporate leadership and establishing new-found energy and drive across the organisation, with directors having a crucial role to play in all of this. It is also essential that the key commitments the council has made regarding organisational improvement, such as increasing the level of reserves and delivering key savings targets, turn into a reality. The authority has an ambition to become recognised as one of the best London councils by 2012 but, in order to achieve this, it needs to focus on increasing customer satisfaction, which is currently significantly below the London average, and address the fact that it operates too much in silos. Incremental change will not deliver sufficient progress in either absolute or relative terms. Step change is required, with this necessitating concerted and sustained effort across the authority and a need to ensure the council doesn't get distracted from its main areas of focus. Integral to this is the need for the authority to make a conscious decision regarding what it is going to stop doing. In addition, performance management needs to operate in such a way as to drive performance improvement systematically.

The greater stability that has been established provides for a timely opportunity to re-visit the respective roles and relationships of officers and elected members in the authority. It is important that councillors move away from the approach they were forced to adopt during the recent difficult period and instead fulfil a more strategic role. However, this depends upon officers demonstrating they have the necessary capacity in order to give elected members the confidence to step back. It is important that all of the planned leadership, management and elected member training and development activities turn into a coherent reality. The authority experiences a relatively high level of 'Call-ins' and it is important that the contributory factors to this are identified and addressed. In addition, there would appear to be opportunities for the council to provide greater support to ward councillors.

The chief executive and senior politicians are making a conscious effort to ensure the council raises its profile and engages more effectively with key influencers and decision-makers in the region. They are also actively engaging staff and internal communications have clearly improved as a result. However, staff morale requires further attention and sickness absence levels in the authority are a cause for concern. The council is clearly committed to investing in staff and elected members and is looking to develop a series of work/life balance initiatives and a well-being programme, building on work that has already been undertaken developing a range of new staff benefits.

The time is right to consider the role and functioning of the Harrow Strategic Partnership. Many people see the need for a body to be established that is truly strategic and there is clearly growing support for the undertaking of a fundamental re-think of public service delivery in the borough, looking afresh at what is delivered by whom, where and how. Whilst securing universal buy-in to such an approach would be challenging, the context of changing demographics and a need to maximise the benefit gleaned from ever-tighter levels of resources warrants the matter being given careful consideration. It is also important that the council fully appreciates its partners and better recognises, and capitalises upon, what they have to offer in order to maximise benefit for the borough.

Recommendations

Following the peer review, we recommend that the council:

- Ensures it retains a clear focus on the key commitments it has made regarding organisational improvement, such as increasing the level of reserves and delivering key savings targets
- Establishes a programme of development activity for the Harrow Strategic Partnership, focusing on establishing a greater commitment to working together and enhancing the effectiveness of joint working
- Keeps under review the revised overview and scrutiny arrangements and the support provided to the function
- Establishes the means by which to identify, in a systematic way, the difficulties being experienced by ward councillors in a range of matters and develops appropriate responses to address them
- Undertakes a review of its relationship with the voluntary and community sector
- Ensures performance information is made as easy to understand and utilise as possible and that it is robust

Background

1. The visit to Harrow Council was part of the national Local Government Improvement Programme (LGIP) of peer reviews of local authorities, arranged by the Improvement and Development Agency for local government (IDeA). A peer review is designed to help an authority assess its current achievements and its capacity to improve.
2. The basis for the assessment is a specially constructed benchmark of the ideal, fully effective local authority. The benchmark focuses on four key organisational themes: leadership and governance, customer focus and community engagement, resource and performance management and organisation and people.
3. The peer review is not an inspection, rather it offers a supportive approach, undertaken by friends, albeit 'critical friends', and its intention is to help a council identify its current strengths as much as what it needs to improve. Peer review is part of an ongoing change process, whereby the recommendations from it can inform improvement planning.
4. Harrow Council, together with the Harrow Strategic Partnership (HSP), commissioned a peer review that would look at both bodies. In doing so, they have helped to pilot a new approach to self assessment and peer review that the IDeA and the Local Government Association (LGA) hope to see form part of the new performance regime under comprehensive area assessment (CAA).
5. The members of the peer review team were:
 - Councillor Alan Jarrett, deputy leader of Medway Council
 - Councillor June Bridle, leader of the Labour group, Southampton City Council
 - Howard Davis, regional associate, Improvement and Development Agency
 - Sara Williams, assistant chief executive, London Borough of Tower Hamlets
 - Leila Ferguson, chief executive, West Berkshire Mencap
 - Jane Sullivan, programme manager, Building Capacity East
 - Chris Bowron, Improvement and Development Agency
6. The programme for the peer review was organised in advance and included a variety of activities designed to enable members of the team to meet and talk to a spectrum of internal and external stakeholders. Examples of activities the team undertook are:
 - Discussions with the political leadership and senior management of the council
 - Meetings with a range of elected members
 - Workshop activities with the management groups, executive and board of the HSP
 - Workshops with staff from different levels in the council
 - Meetings and telephone interviews with external partners

- Discussions with local residents
 - Visits to various facilities and establishments across the borough
7. The team was appreciative of the welcome and hospitality provided by the council and would like to thank everybody that they met during the process for their time and contributions. The support provided to the team by Andrea Durn and several of her colleagues was very much appreciated.
 8. The feedback given to the council and partners on the final day reported on the key messages from the peer review. This report gives a more detailed written account of the findings of the review and is structured around the areas of the benchmark outlined above.

Context

9. Harrow has a population of 214,000 and is continuing to grow, with 4,000 new homes seen to be required over the next 10 years. The working age population totals 120,000 and, of these, 78 per cent are economically active. The average age of the population is two years older than for London as a whole. The majority of Harrow residents are from a minority ethnic background, with the borough being one of only nine council areas in the country where this is the case. Harrow is the most religiously diverse council area in England. Harrow is a key area in London for new business start up, with a trend towards small firm development and self employment. A key challenge for the borough is the development of suitable spaces for businesses as they expand.
10. The council has had a Conservative Administration since May 2006, with 37 Conservative councillors, 24 Labour councillors and 2 Liberal Democrat councillors. There are 21 wards in the borough, each with three elected members. The council's cabinet comprises 10 elected members. Since July 2007, the overview and scrutiny structure has comprised an overview and scrutiny committee and a performance and finance scrutiny sub-committee, with this representing a move away from service specific sub-committees.
11. A new chief executive commenced with the council in April 2007, with this following after the establishment of a new organisational structure in the February of that year. The structure comprises five directorates: community and environment services, adults and housing services, children's services, strategy and business support and finance. The council has nearly 7,000 employees, of whom 4,000 are based in schools.
12. The Harrow Strategic Partnership (HSP) comprises a board and an executive, with councillors from the two main parties being represented. The HSP is tasked with delivering the Local Area Agreement (LAA) and the medium-term objectives in the sustainable community plan. Several management groups exist below board level: the children and young people's strategic partnership, safer Harrow, adult health and social care, community cohesion and sustainable development and enterprise. These, in turn, are underpinned by delivery sub groups. Two reference groups exist relating to older people and the voluntary and community sector, with their remit being to ensure the interests of these two key areas are represented in the decision-making process.

Ambition

- √ The council and its partners are clearly ambitious for the borough and demonstrate a desire to progress
 - √ The Administration is demonstrating strong political leadership and has established greater stability in the council
 - √ The chief executive is held in high regard and is seen as having made a significant impact in a short period of time
 - √ The council is keen to improve and is responding to the challenge of the 'place shaping' and community leadership agendas
 - √ The council and its partners have put community cohesion at the centre of their vision for the borough
- Changes to the Harrow Strategic Partnership need to be founded on a fundamental re-think of the purpose of such a body and an enhanced commitment to working together
 - Revisions to the Harrow Strategic Partnership and the move to a new Local Area Agreement need to combine with the development of a clear long term vision for the borough agreed by all partners
 - There is a need for wider corporate leadership in the council
 - The authority has made good initial progress since the arrival of the new chief executive but it needs to be cemented and it is important that key organisational improvement commitments are delivered
 - Further improvement requires new-found energy and drive across the organisation
 - It is important that the cohesion agenda has wide ownership and is mainstreamed
13. Harrow Council and its partners are clearly ambitious for the borough and demonstrate a strong desire to progress further. There is clearly a strong commitment to enhancing the quality of life for people living in Harrow. Despite the area already having the lowest levels of overall crime in London and there being good community cohesion, there was an impressive level of determination amongst people we met not only to ensure such successes were sustained but that they were built upon.
14. The council has many things that it can be proud of. These include a high performing benefits service, a ranking of 19th nationally for attainment of five or more GCSEs at A* - C grade, customer satisfaction with libraries and waste disposal exceeding the London average and a level of recycling and composting which, based on performance in the first quarter of this year, places it amongst the best in London. The benefits service is the first in the country to work with the Department of Work and Pensions in piloting voice risk analysis software aimed at identifying

possible fraud, with savings of £174,000 having been made in the period from May to September 2007.

15. The council is responding to the challenge of the 'place shaping' and community leadership agendas, with the leader and deputy leader chairing the HSP board and executive respectively and portfolio holders being involved in some of the management groups. Four new children's centres have been built with a further five due for completion by February 2008. Funding has been secured for a borough-wide sixth form collegiate, the council has enabled the development of the first state-aided Hindu school in the country, a £3million investment programme has been established for Harrow town centre and the Prince Edward playing fields have been re-developed, in conjunction with Barnet Football Club, to provide a community-based centre for sporting excellence. The council has worked with residents and a range of bodies, including the London Borough of Ealing, Network Rail and Transport for London, to establish a new rail bridge over one of the busiest traffic routes in the borough in order to cut congestion. A key commitment for delivery in the future is an extension of the provision of affordable pre-school, after school and school holiday childcare.
16. As part of its overall vision, the council is committed to becoming recognised as one of the best London councils by 2012. Signs of promising progress include the Annual Performance Assessment (APA) of services for children and young people judging overall effectiveness to have increased to 3 stars, with significant progress since the Joint Area Review having been seen. There is a clear sense of momentum in the organisation and much greater stability than before, with strong political leadership being instrumental in achieving this. The chief executive has also played a crucial role in this. He is held in high regard by people across the council and in partner organisations and is seen as having made a significant impact in a short period of time. The good initial progress that has been made needs to be cemented by developing wider corporate leadership and establishing new-found energy and drive across the organisation, with directors having a crucial role to play in all of this. It is also essential that the key commitments the council has made regarding organisational improvement, such as increasing the level of reserves and delivering key savings targets, turn into a reality. We recommend that the council ensures it retains a clear focus on these commitments in order to aid this.
17. The sustainable community plan was adopted in November 2006 by the HSP and in February 2007 by the council. It covers the period to 2020 and is based on a vision that: 'Harrow will be a place which offers the best of capital and country and is loved by its residents. Harrow will be a desirable place to live, learn, work and play'. This vision is broken down into a series of medium-term ambitions with four year achievement targets in order to aid continuous progress.
18. Harrow is a highly diverse borough with demographics that are set to continue changing and the council and its partners have therefore put community cohesion at the centre of their thinking. The council's own vision includes the borough being cosmopolitan, confident and cohesive whilst the sustainable community plan talks about celebrating what people in the borough have in common, capitalising on its diversity and Harrow being an example to the rest of London on how communities from different backgrounds can form a cohesive community. As a cautionary note, however, it is important that the council and its partners ensure the community cohesion agenda has wide ownership and is mainstreamed – it is important that it sits at the heart of everybody's thinking and activity and the danger of it being seen as the responsibility of the community cohesion management group or individual organisations or groups of staff is avoided.

19. Following the local government White Paper and related Bill, and with work currently taking place to establish a new LAA, the time is right to consider the role and functioning of the HSP and this has clearly been recognised in the commissioning of review activities around it. Discussions with a range of people involved in the HSP led us to conclude that changes to the HSP need to be founded on a fundamental re-think of the purpose of such a body. Many people clearly see the need for a body to be established that is truly strategic, fulfilling a role of channelling the resources of the area in such a way as to maximise the benefit they bring to the quality of life for people in the borough and ensure key priorities are fulfilled. Central to this would be the creation of a long-term vision for the borough that is agreed by all partners, building on the one that is already in place. For the HSP to be effective, structural change needs to be complemented by the right culture and we recommend that a programme of development activity is established focusing on establishing a greater commitment to working together and enhancing the effectiveness of joint working.

Prioritisation

- √ Good progress is being made against the targets in the current Local Area Agreement
 - √ A reduced number of priorities have been established by the council for 2008/09
 - √ There is a clear understanding of the services that require improvement and investment has been earmarked for them
 - √ The council is working on ensuring its flagship actions reflect the new priorities and budget and aims to ensure the priorities resonate with people
- Incremental change in the council's priority areas will not deliver sufficient progress in either absolute or relative terms - step change has to be delivered through concerted and sustained effort
 - Whilst the corporate priorities have been reduced in number they are very broad
 - It is important that the council rationalises the number of projects it is delivering and doesn't get distracted from its main areas of focus
 - The council's fundamental service reviews have identified significant savings but there is still too much reliance on an incremental rather than strategic approach to making savings
 - There is the need for the authority to make a conscious decision regarding what it is going to stop doing
20. Good progress is being made against the targets in the current Local Area Agreement. Examples include 442 homes in the borough signing up to being smoke-free in the first quarter of this year against a target of 250, the percentage of people aged 16 to 18 not in education, employment or training (NEET) being 4.1 per cent in the first quarter of the year against a target of five per cent and breastfeeding initiation rates of 67 per cent in the second quarter against a target of 64 per cent.
21. The council has established a reduced number of priorities for 2008/09, dropping the number from 11 to six. The six are as follows:
- Delivering cleaner streets and better environmental services and keeping crime low
 - Redeveloping the town centre
 - Improving the well-being of adults and children and the care of those who most need the council's help
 - Extending the community use of schools while making education even better

- Improving the way the council works for residents
 - Developing communities where people from different backgrounds get on well together
22. However, whilst the corporate priorities have been reduced in number they are very broad and the council will therefore need to ensure it is clear about which activities it is going to focus on. It will be aided in this through the work taking place at present to identify 'flagship actions' for 2008/09 which reflect the new priorities and budget. The 'flagship actions' are tangible activities that help to translate the vision and corporate priorities in a way that ensures they resonate with people. Examples of such actions from this year include:
- 'The wait for the plumber is over' – the introduction of time-specific appointments for housing repairs as part of the priority to increase customer satisfaction
 - 'Community pay back' – implementation, with the Probation Service, of a programme in which offenders undertake environmental improvement work as part of the priority of working with partners to reduce crime and the fear of crime
 - 'Four Aces' – opening four children's centres as part of the priority to expand participation opportunities for young people
23. The way the council, supported by Capital Ambition, is programming its fundamental reviews of services also reflects its attempts to prioritise. The authority is aiming to review all of its services over a period of three years and commenced this year with reviews of children's services, public realm activities and sports, leisure and libraries. These services were selected after consideration of performance and value for money data and have identified savings of around £3million for the 2008/09 budget.
24. Whilst such a level of savings is clearly significant there is still too much reliance on an incremental rather than strategic approach to making savings with many people in the organisation referring to their experiences of 'death by a thousand cuts' and 'salami-slicing' over recent years.
25. The council is also clear about which services it is prioritising for improvement and investment of around £2million has been earmarked for them in the 2008/09 budget. The priority areas include planning, with an aim of securing the lifting of the Planning Standards Authority designation in 2008/09, adult social care, and the well-being of older people in particular, housing and environmental services, specifically waste collection and cleanliness, and Access Harrow which is the council's contact centre and one-stop-shop. Fundamental service reviews are planned in adult social care, housing and planning.
26. The council needs to ensure its prioritisation activities achieve the desired outcome. Incremental change in the priority areas will not deliver sufficient progress in either absolute or relative terms. This is underlined by the fact that, although fifty-four per cent of key Best Value performance indicators improved last year, this only reflected the average progress made by comparator authorities. Therefore it is step change that is required, with this necessitating concerted and sustained effort and a need to ensure the council doesn't get distracted from its main areas of focus. Integral to this is the need for the authority, in order to underpin its other prioritisation activities, to make a conscious decision regarding what it is going to stop doing. The council improvement programme, introduced in June this year, contains the flagship actions, a nine step

improvement plan developed by the chief executive and the council's top 90 projects. This is a massive agenda which will pose a serious challenge to the council's capacity and may necessitate the authority rationalising the number of projects it is delivering.

Decision-making and scrutiny

- √ Decision-making in the council is informed by a range of data sources
- √ A new overview and scrutiny structure was introduced earlier this year and there are a number of supporting tools in place
- √ Efforts are being made to ensure elected members are kept informed of issues and all councillors have opportunities to put forward their views
- More effective forward planning is required in the council, with issues being considered sufficiently far in advance to enable options to be properly evaluated and decision-making to be fully effective
- Increasing the amount of pre-decision scrutiny could enhance opportunities for political debate and discussion
- There is a timely opportunity to re-visit the respective roles and relationships of officers and elected members
- The role of overview and scrutiny in respect of the Harrow Strategic Partnership is unclear
- The revised overview and scrutiny arrangements and support need to be kept under review

27. Decision-making in the council is informed by a range of data sources with, for example, the location of children's centres and extended school clusters having been informed through the mapping and analysis of key socio-economic data. Examples of data and information sources developed by the council include the report commissioned to identify the specific needs of the rapidly-growing Somali community in the borough and the 'Year Ahead Statement' which is a comprehensive source of information on performance, value for money, customer feedback, delivery against projects and the policy context which is produced in July each year to inform financial and service planning. Other examples include the information emanating from the Annual MORI quality of life survey, which is sponsored by the HSP, and the residents' panel comprising 1,200 local people. In addition, 'Vitality Profiles' are produced by the council which draw together and map statistics and information from a range of agencies concerning key social, economic, environmental, health, housing and crime considerations, such as the extent and spatial spread at Super Output Area level of anti social behaviour, council tax benefit payment, free school meals, car ownership, life expectancy and low birth weight.

28. The council's overview and scrutiny function has undertaken reviews in a number of areas, including water management and homecare provision. The former involved the setting up of a water management and drought planning challenge panel to consider issues around the demand and supply of water as a result of the summer drought in 2006, with the approach to the review

being cited as best practice at the 2007 INLOGOV conference. The work around homecare involved consideration of the council's proposals on changes in homecare charging and the findings of the review served to inform a change in charging levels and the use of direct payments.

29. A new overview and scrutiny structure was introduced earlier this year, as outlined in the 'Context' section at the start of this report. The performance and finance sub-committee receives exception reports on council performance and delivery by the authority and its partners against LAA targets. The two main committees are supplemented by the setting up of challenge panels, working groups and light touch review activities on a task and finish basis. There are a number of tools in place to support effective overview and scrutiny, including a protocol defining working arrangements with the cabinet and setting out how the scrutiny programme will support the achievement of corporate priorities and the improvement programme. In addition, the leader, deputy leader and the chief executive meet quarterly with the chair and vice-chair of overview and scrutiny to review how things are functioning. A new guide for officers on scrutiny has also recently been produced. These are all positive steps but it is too early to judge the effectiveness of the revised overview and scrutiny arrangements and we therefore recommend that they, and the support provided to the function, are kept under review. In addition, the role of overview and scrutiny in respect of the HSP is unclear and we suggest that this is considered as part of the fundamental re-think of the strategic partnership referred to earlier.
30. Efforts are being made by the council to ensure elected members are kept informed of issues, for example through the elected member bulletin, and all councillors have opportunities to put forward their views. Such opportunities include 'Councillors' Questions' which enables elected members to ask questions at cabinet meetings and question and answer sessions with the leader, chief executive and portfolio holders for overview and scrutiny members. Despite this, however, Opposition councillors clearly feel there is too little opportunity for political debate and discussion and this is a contributory factor in the relatively high level of 'Call-ins' in Harrow. Using 'Call-in' in such a way does little to aid the effective running of the authority and it is important that the contributory factors are identified and addressed. Increasing the amount of pre-decision scrutiny may represent one way in which the opportunities for political debate and discussion could be enhanced.
31. The increased stability that has been established in the authority, referred to under the 'Ambition' section earlier in this report, provides for a timely opportunity to re-visit the respective roles and relationships of officers and elected members in the authority. It is widely acknowledged that, during the period when the council was experiencing significant capacity issues, including the absence of the former chief executive, and the financial crisis facing the authority was at its greatest, elected members played a very 'hands-on' role. This is seen, in the circumstances, as having been necessary. Now that things are more settled, it is important that councillors adjust their approach in order to fulfil a more strategic role. This requires the establishment of a virtuous circle in which officers are able to operate in a way that provides them with the opportunity to demonstrate they have the necessary capacity which, in turn, gives elected members the confidence to step back. Ultimately, this is about establishing mutual understanding and greater trust. Integral to this is getting the basics right, such as reports for councillors being produced in a timely fashion which are concise and focused but also clearly outline all of the options for elected members to consider. Another area to be looked at is the effectiveness of forward planning, with issues needing to be considered sufficiently far in advance to enable options to be properly evaluated and decision-making to be fully effective. A consideration here is the need for

the cabinet and corporate strategic board to have sufficient opportunities to meet together informally to consider emerging challenges and issues for the organisation.

Customer focus

- √ The council's nine step improvement plan identifies the need to focus on increasing customer satisfaction and creating the right first impression
 - √ The council and its partners are fully conscious of the complexity of delivering services in such a highly diverse environment
 - √ The council has secured Level 4 of the Equalities Standard for local government
 - √ Access Harrow recently won the 'Call Centre of the Year' award and the one stop shop has high customer satisfaction ratings
 - √ The council recognises the need to invest in and enhance Access Harrow
- Overall customer satisfaction and satisfaction with complaint handling are significantly below the London average
 - Ensuring complaints are dealt with more effectively, combined with improvements to Access Harrow, are likely to have a positive impact on customer satisfaction
 - Greater understanding is needed of the impact of specific actions and communications on customer satisfaction
32. Harrow Council and its partners are fully conscious of the complexity of delivering services in an environment that is as diverse as theirs. A recurring theme in our conversations with people we met was the complex make-up of the borough, with there being a tremendous level of pride over it and a good level of awareness regarding the need to plan and deliver services and activities accordingly. Examples of the way the council reflects this diversity in the way it operates include having established a programme of equality impact assessments, with an intention of every service being assessed at least once every three years, and attaining Level 4 of the Equalities Standard for local government. In addition, the authority is one of the first in London to utilise Telecare technology to assist people to live independently. The system operates 24 hours a day providing early detection of accidents and falls and also involves the use of technology to reduce the risk of falls occurring in the first place. The council has also established a dedicated team to deal with all prospective direct payment clients and facilitate the 'In Total Control' self-directed care model.
33. Access Harrow was established in May 2006 and deals with enquiries relating to around 80 per cent of services. The one-stop-shop element of the facility has high customer satisfaction ratings, with 70 per cent of people questioned rating the level of service as 'good' or 'excellent'. The contact centre element of Access Harrow recently won the 'Call Centre of the Year' award at the 'Good Communications Awards'.
34. However, the authority recognises the need to focus on increasing customer satisfaction and creating the right first impression with these being reflected in the nine step improvement plan established by the chief executive. The importance being attached to these reflects the fact that

overall customer satisfaction and satisfaction with complaint handling are significantly below the London average. On the 2006 Best Value performance indicator for customer satisfaction the authority achieved 42 per cent against a London average of 54 per cent, whilst satisfaction with complaint handling scored 24 per cent compared to an average across the capital of 31 per cent. In addition, there is a recognition of the need to invest in and enhance Access Harrow, with the council seeking to reduce customer waiting times, extend the range of council services available through the facility to include the likes of concessionary fares and planning, review staffing levels and re-design the reception area. The authority is also looking to extend the means by which people can conduct transactions with the council on a self-service basis, with a combined aim of enhancing the service to customers whilst simultaneously reducing the demand on Access Harrow and delivering savings.

35. Delivering such improvements to Access Harrow, combined with ensuring complaints are dealt with more effectively and lessons are learnt from them, is likely to have a positive impact on customer satisfaction. However, it is important that people in the organisation understand it is their specific actions, combined with effective communications on the part of the council, which will do most to shape the levels of satisfaction people have. Improving customer satisfaction is not a responsibility of the 'corporate body' – it is the responsibility of each individual.

External communication and community empowerment

- √ A wide range of consultation and community engagement mechanisms are in place
 - √ The importance of strategic communications is understood at the top managerial and political level in the council and further investment is being made
 - √ The council has established a number of mechanisms to encourage participation by local people
 - √ Prosperity Action Teams represent an attempt to devolve decision-making
- There have been some significant gaps in consultation arrangements on certain projects
 - A more co-ordinated approach to consultation is required and people who participate need to receive feedback
 - Maximum benefit is not yet being gleaned from the Prosperity Action Teams
 - There would appear to be opportunities for the council to provide greater support to elected members in their role as ward councillors
 - There needs to be a corporate commitment to effective communications and a clear understanding of what the council is attempting to achieve through it
 - The Harrow Strategic Partnership needs to publicly demonstrate its value
36. The council has established a wide range of consultation and community engagement tools and a number of mechanisms to encourage participation by local people. Some of these, such as the residents' panel and MORI quality of life survey, were referred to earlier in this report. Others include 'Question Time' at formal meetings, such as Full Council and cabinet, which provides an opportunity for the public to raise issues, and 'Public Call-in' through which, with the support of at least 150 local people, members of the public can challenge an executive decision. Summits have been held for local individuals and organisations to input to the development of the LAA and sustainable community plan, a tenants' compact provides the opportunity for tenants and residents to better influence the services they receive and there was wide consultation on the reorganisation of sixth form education in the borough. Also, there are a range of opportunities for young people to input, such as the Harrow Youth Council, the annual youth conference and the grants determination panel through which young people are empowered to allocate to youth organisations, in the form of small grants, £200,000 from the New Opportunities Fund.
37. However, our activities identified the need for a more co-ordinated approach to consultation in order to maximise the value from it and avoid any risk of 'consultation fatigue'. It is especially important that people who participate in consultation receive feedback on the issues they have been asked about. This was a particular frustration amongst residents we met with who form part of the council's residents' panel and are often unclear as to what the outcomes have been from

their participation. In addition, we gleaned there have been some significant gaps in consultation arrangements on certain projects. The prime example is that of 'Wiseworks', a sheltered employment training facility dedicated to developing users' track record of achievement and confidence. In seeking to determine its future, the authority committed to consulting stakeholders but dissatisfaction with the way this was undertaken led to the executive decision on the facility being 'called-in' and the weaknesses of the consultation exercise being highlighted. We are unclear how widespread such problems are but it is important the council is confident decisions are being taken on the basis of sound consultation.

38. Prosperity Action Teams represent an attempt by the council to devolve decision-making. There are ten such teams across the borough, led by elected members and covering small groups of wards, with an aim of enabling the council to better respond to the needs of local people in their neighbourhood. A sum of £15,000 is available per ward, with attempts made to relate decisions on funding allocations to issues emerging through the activities of 'Safer Neighbourhoods Teams' and tenants and residents' associations. Much of what has been delivered so far has involved improvements being made to open spaces but it is clear from people we spoke to that maximum benefit is not yet being gleaned from this mechanism. At the heart of this matter lie two issues – the funding being for capital expenditure, with difficulties arising when projects are identified as having revenue implications, and some councillors experiencing difficulty in accessing their communities effectively and therefore not securing their engagement. This latter point highlights the need for the council to better support elected members and ensure they have the information and skills necessary to effectively engage across communities.
39. Looking more generally at the issue of elected members being able to fulfil a role as leaders of their local communities, there would appear to be opportunities for the council to provide greater support to ward councillors. In meeting with a number of backbench councillors, we identified a range of frustrations regarding the support they received from the council including poor IT provision, a lack of provision of facilities in which to hold surgeries, poor responsiveness from some officers when seeking to progress issues on behalf of constituents and inadequacies in training and development. We recommend that the council establishes the means by which to identify, in a systematic way, the difficulties being experienced by elected members in these and any other areas and develops appropriate responses to address them. In saying this, we acknowledge the council has already moved to develop a more comprehensive approach to elected member training and development.
40. The importance of strategic communications is understood at the top managerial and political level in the council, with the enhancing of council communications forming part of the chief executive's nine step improvement plan and investment already taking place. Examples of such investment include the frequency with which the council's magazine for local people, entitled 'Harrow People', is produced increasing from two times per year to six, a new website and the development of a new combined council tax booklet and A to Z of services. The council is in the process of appointing Westminster City Council's communications function to provide strategic direction and shape the development of the council's communications function. A series of campaigns have been planned to raise awareness of the council's objectives and activities and secure greater involvement in them, such as 'green and clean Harrow', 'safer streets', 'promoting well being' and 'active leisure'. Through all of these activities, the council is aiming to achieve the 'Gold Standard' of the Local Government Association's 'Reputation' campaign.
41. However, in order to succeed, there needs to be a corporate commitment to effective communications, which goes way beyond the senior levels of the organisation and is based upon

people having a clear understanding of what the council is attempting to achieve through its communications activity. As briefly outlined in the previous section of this report, the effectiveness of communications is a key determinant of the level of customer satisfaction with a council, thus people across the organisation need to appreciate the higher level impact of their approach and attitude towards communication.

42. In relation to the HSP, our discussions have revealed the need to ensure partners appropriately share the credit for key achievements when it comes to communicating about them. There was a view amongst certain partners that the council is very quick to claim credit for things in which others have been involved. Some people view the HSP itself as needing to be profiled but this isn't universal. Irrespective of whether this avenue is pursued or not, we would encourage a co-ordinated approach amongst partners to communicating what they are committing to delivering for local people, including the development of a common set of positive key messages, both regarding the priorities being worked to and the progress being achieved. Essentially this is about the partnership publicly demonstrating its value.

Delivering Through Partnerships

- √ A range of high performing, high quality and innovative services, activities and initiatives are being delivered by the council and its partners which improve the quality of people's lives
 - √ Harrow experiences low levels of crime overall and positive community cohesion
 - √ Private sector partnerships are being used by the council to boost capacity and service delivery
 - √ The Harrow Strategic Partnership management groups broadly function well
 - √ There is a shared commitment within the council and primary care trust to enhance joint working at senior levels
-
- A fundamental review of the use of public sector resources in the borough would offer the prospect of enhanced partnership working and service delivery
 - Whilst there is much sharing of intelligence between partners, there are seen to be opportunities to enhance this and even establish a dedicated joint intelligence team
 - The council needs to fully appreciate its partners and better recognise what they have to offer for the benefit of the borough
 - The council needs to take a fresh look at its relationship with the voluntary and community sector in order to enhance trust, engagement and mutual benefit
 - There would be benefit in the council looking to increase its engagement and profile sub-regionally, regionally and beyond
43. A range of high performing, high quality and innovative services, activities and initiatives that improve the quality of people's lives in Harrow are being delivered by the council and its partners and of which people we spoke with are justifiably proud. Examples include the low levels of crime overall, good levels of community cohesion, the children's centres through which integrated services are delivered by a range of agencies, extended schools and the annual youth conference and youth achievement awards. Other examples include the 'Under One Sky' festival, the restoration work at Canon's Park and location there of one of the 'Safer Neighbourhoods Teams', the Alexandra Avenue clinic where social services and health work together to support children and their families, and the new £2.7million Beacon Centre at Rayners Lane - a community centre providing, amongst other things, sports facilities, IT, meeting rooms and courses delivered by Harrow College in such areas as catering, retail and business skills.
44. The 'Weeks of Action' are another example of successful partnership activity, with the council and a wide range of partners working intensively together in a specific area of the borough for a number of days to tackle such issues as graffiti, abandoned vehicles and anti social behaviour. The number of adoptions of children looked after has increased 100 per cent on last year following the

council's partnership with the Coram Foundation and the council and the primary care trust have pooled budgets to provide a joint community equipment service. Also, a mechanism to enable third party reporting of racial and religious hate crime has been established through the Harrow Multi-Agency Forum, enabling people to report such crime to voluntary community groups with a panel of partners, including the police, various council functions and Victim Support, meeting regularly to consider each case and how to respond. A performance indicator relating to third party reporting of crimes of this nature features in the LAA and indicators to measure levels of community tension are also being established.

45. Private sector partnerships are being used by the council to boost capacity and service delivery, with a key example being that of the Business Transformation Partnership with Capita. Three key initial systems-based projects have already been delivered - a new customer relationship management (CRM) system, enterprise resource planning (ERP) and management information systems (MIS). Such activities are focused on improving the council's financial management, performance management, procurement, human resources systems and contact with customers. Savings of over £1million were delivered in the last financial year, including £500,000 through improved procurement, with the programme as a whole having a target of delivering £45million in savings to the council over 10 years.
46. The council established a single contract with Kier in July 2007 to deliver all building and maintenance work for the next five years. This contract is worth £100million and has brought together 100 contracts that were previously individually let. AccordMP have been contracted to deliver public realm and infrastructure work, with the result being a 25 per cent reduction in recalls for defective work undertaken on behalf of the council. The authority has also utilised expertise from Capita, PriceWaterhouseCoopers (PWC) and the Department of Health in the fundamental service reviews it has undertaken.
47. Despite all of these successes, our discussions with a range of people have led us to conclude that the council needs to fully appreciate its partners and better recognise, and capitalise upon, what they have to offer in order to maximise benefit for the borough. As examples, there was a view amongst some private sector partners that their expertise could be better tapped-into by the council, for example to inform service planning and future strategy. The council also needs to take a fresh look at its relationship with the voluntary and community sector in order to enhance trust, engagement and mutual benefit and we recommend that the authority undertakes a review in this area. Overview and scrutiny is due to shortly embark upon a review of the council's support for the sector, including the use, ownership and management of community premises. This could form a useful element of the overall review we are recommending is undertaken but, on the other hand, it has the potential to exacerbate the tensions that already exist depending on the remit of the review and the way it is undertaken. It is acknowledged that there have been difficulties in the relationship between the council and the primary care trust but a shared commitment has recently emerged to enhance joint working at senior levels, with work to bring this about due to commence shortly through support secured from the Department of Health.
48. The authority is engaging regionally and sub-regionally, being involved, for example, in the West London Alliance, the London Centre of Excellence, the London Scrutiny Network and London Authorities Mutual Limited, a local authority-owned insurance company which has saved the council £120,000 this year alone. The chief executive and senior politicians are making a conscious effort to ensure the council raises its profile and engages more effectively with key influencers and decision-makers in the capital. As an example, the chief executive is chair of the pan-London anti-social behaviour and respect group and the council is engaging closely with

Capital Ambition regarding its improvement agenda. In addition, at a national level, the council is represented on the Lifting the Burdens Task Force. We would encourage the authority to continue its efforts in this area because of the benefits to be gleaned from increased engagement and profile sub-regionally, regionally and beyond.

49. We highlighted under the 'Ambition' section of this report the recognition that exists of both the need and opportunity to consider the role and functioning of the HSP. Whilst this is a reflection of the fact that the partnership at board and executive level needs to function more effectively and meaningfully, the management groups that exist below these levels broadly function well. We were impressed with the willingness and ability of partners to talk openly in front of one another in these groupings when we met with them. Out of these discussions we gleaned that, whilst there is much sharing of intelligence between partners, there are also seen to be opportunities to enhance information sharing – potentially even the establishment of a dedicated joint intelligence team. Taking this concept and applying it more broadly, there is clearly growing support for the undertaking of a fundamental re-think of public service delivery in the borough, looking afresh at what is delivered by whom, where and how. Whilst securing universal buy-in to such an approach would be challenging, the context of changing demographics and a need to maximise the benefit gleaned from ever-tighter levels of resources, combined with the prospect it offers for enhanced partnership working and service delivery, warrants the matter being given careful consideration.

Performance management

- √ The council has responded to the corporate assessment regarding the need to enhance the role of elected members in performance management
 - √ Investment has been made in SAP and related applications
 - √ The authority has sought to integrate service and financial planning more effectively
 - √ An extensive performance management framework is in place in the authority
 - √ The need to further improve performance management in the council is recognised
- There is a need to ensure performance information is made easy to understand and utilise
 - The council needs to ensure performance information is robust and used to drive improvement systematically
 - Target setting needs to be realistic and rigorous – SMART
 - SAP needs to be fully rolled-out and training provided to ensure benefits are maximised
50. The council's corporate assessment reported that the authority had a clear performance management framework and we have seen through our activities how extensive the framework is. In developing the framework further since the arrival of the new chief executive, the authority has sought to integrate service and financial planning more effectively. In July of each year the authority produces the 'Year Ahead Statement', which was outlined earlier in this report under 'Decision-making and scrutiny'. This informs the drafting of a service improvement plan for each directorate, each of which is considered at a challenge panel chaired by the chief executive or deputy chief executive in November. These panels consider the extent to which directorate thinking on resource allocation and proposed projects reflects the corporate priorities and assess the targets being proposed for the year ahead. The plans are presented to cabinet in draft form in December and are finalised in February in line with the budget-setting process.
51. The council has established four improvement boards: adults and housing, children's services, community and environment and corporate finance, strategy and business support. These meet quarterly, chaired by the chief executive or deputy chief executive and involving cabinet members. They consider a range of information including performance indicators, value for money measures, spend against budget and risks. The four improvement boards are also tasked with ensuring targets are realistic. This is a crucial element of their role given the self assessment acknowledges that: "The setting of targets has proved a challenge across the council". Whilst targets need to be realistic they also need to be stretching in order to aid the achievement of the step change referred to earlier in this report under 'Prioritisation'.

52. Going forward, it is important that targets are also rigorous and SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, resourced and timetabled), with all of this enabling the authority to be clear about what it is trying to achieve by when, ensure the resources that are required to deliver objectives are in place, effectively monitor progress, drive performance improvement and publicise and celebrate successful delivery.
53. The council produces a regular strategic performance report outlining progress against the authority's most important performance indicators. The council has plans to extend the scope of the strategic performance report to cover risks, value for money and progress on key projects in order to provide a more holistic picture. The report is presented to both cabinet and the performance and finance sub-committee and made available to staff and the general public. It can be seen from this, plus the elected member development activity around performance management which is currently being planned, that the authority has responded to the corporate assessment finding regarding the need to enhance the role of elected members in performance management.
54. As outlined in the previous section of this report, the council has invested, through the Business Transformation Partnership with Capita, in a range of management information systems to help enhance the running of the organisation. People are clearly proud of what has been achieved thus far in terms of putting the SAP system and its related applications in place yet at the same time they are acknowledging the programme hasn't been without its difficulties. The system now needs to be fully rolled-out and comprehensive training provided to ensure the benefits of the systems and the related investment are maximised.
55. Whilst there is an extensive performance management framework in place and efforts have been made to enhance the approach, the fact that performance management features in the chief executive's nine step improvement plan reflects the fact that the council recognises it needs to be more effective. Performance management needs to operate in such a way as to drive performance improvement systematically. What the council has managed in terms of reducing the turnaround time for void properties provides a good example of what can be achieved when performance management operates effectively. In 2005/06, the turnaround was higher than the London average of 45 days but by focusing on the issue and delivering the necessary change the second quarter of this year saw this reduced to 21 days – against a target of 29 days.
56. The performance management element of the improvement plan highlights, amongst other things, the need to provide a clearer oversight of delivery and improvement and to look at performance more holistically. During our review activities we considered a range of performance information, including the strategic performance report, and on the back of this we recommend that the authority ensures performance information is made as easy to understand and utilise as possible and that it is robust. When operating on the basis of exception reporting, it is vital for elected members and senior managers to be confident both in the data and information presented and the decisions made regarding what isn't reported.

Resource management

- √ The council has done much to stabilise its financial position and is enhancing its financial management
 - √ There is a commitment to building up the council's reserves to a more prudent and sustainable level
 - √ Value for money benchmarking has identified services with high unit costs which in turn has informed savings targets
 - √ A review of the council's assets is generating significant funding
- Significant financial savings are required going forward but the council is establishing a good track record
 - Whilst the council's use of resources judgement is unlikely to improve in the near future, the authority is committing to the correct actions but it has to ensure it delivers them
 - The authority needs to be "smart as well as strict" in making savings

57. The council has worked hard in recent times to stabilise its financial position and is continuously striving to enhance its financial management capacity after experiencing an extremely difficult period, including a budget overspend of £3million in 2005/06. Significant financial savings are required going forward, totalling £12million in 2008/09, but the council is establishing a good track record of delivering the targets it sets, with £19million of savings having been achieved in 2006/07 and the council being on track to deliver a further £16million of savings in the current year.

58. Whilst the council's 'use of resources' judgement is unlikely to improve in the near future, the authority is committing to the correct actions but it has to ensure it delivers them. At the time of the peer review, the overall use of resources score was two out of four, although this masks significant variations in the components comprising the score. With a score of one out of four for financial standing, the council is seeking to build up its level of reserves to a more prudent and sustainable level. Reserves currently total £1.3million and the council is seeking to increase them by £1million each year. In terms of value for money, the council is judged to be achieving a level of two out of four. The authority has engaged in detailed value for money benchmarking, resulting in the identification of services with high unit costs which in turn has informed savings targets. In eighty five per cent of value for money indicators, the council performs above the London average, with examples being education, housing, planning and cultural services. Average value for money is delivered in environmental services and social services.

59. Asset management in the authority is also judged to be three out of four. A review of the council's assets is generating significant funding, with surplus property sales in 2006/07 totalling £7.5million and a further £10million being targeted in the current year. Over the next three years the council is aiming to realise £50million from property disposals.

60. The authority is committed to undertaking a financial effectiveness review, funded by Capital Ambition and is looking to improve its performance on the closure of accounts. It has delivered its Gershon efficiency savings and, as indicated earlier in this report, the effectiveness of procurement is being improved, with Capita playing a key role in enabling this.
61. Staff that we met from all levels of the organisation have a clear understanding of the financial pressures facing the authority and they are clearly mindful of the need to make savings. However, as one person said to us, the authority needs to be “smart as well as strict” in making savings, with there being anecdotal evidence of customer service and the council’s reputation being negatively impacted upon by the rigid enforcement of measures to make savings within individual services rather than common sense being applied.

Change and project management

- √ A clear improvement plan has been established which focuses effort and attention
 - √ The council has secured external resources to aid improvement and build capacity
 - √ The authority and its partners have demonstrated a willingness to open themselves to external challenge
 - √ The council's recent management re-structure has been delivered more effectively than before
 - √ The authority is focusing on the correct changes and improvements to deliver better outcomes for local people but the benefits have still to be secured
- The nine step improvement plan needs to be understood as being about core ways of working – not an additional set of priorities
 - There is insufficient rigour in the authority around project and risk management
 - There is a recognition that the council doesn't deliver large scale change well
 - Changing organisational culture requires persistence and everybody to play their part
 - Levels of self awareness are growing but there needs to be greater acknowledgment of shortcomings

62. It is very positive that the authority and its partners in the HSP have, through innovatively commissioning the peer review of both bodies, demonstrated a willingness to open themselves to external challenge. The forward-thinking nature of this, which indicates a desire to ensure both the council and the HSP make progress in the right direction and are well placed to respond to future challenges, reflects well on everybody concerned. The way in which the council has accessed external funding for elements of the review is an example of the way it uses external resources to aid improvement and build capacity. Other examples include the two tranches of funding secured from Capital Ambition totalling nearly £600,000 to aid work in a variety of areas, including the financial effectiveness review and a management development programme.

63. A clear improvement plan, comprising nine key areas of activity, has been established by the new chief executive and this is serving to focus effort and attention in the organisation. The plan covers the following areas:

- Vision and priorities – developing a clearer long term vision and set of priorities to guide the allocation of resources and which lead to clear tangible actions
- Organisational structures – the introduction of a simpler, fit-for-purpose management structure, with statutory officers on the 'top table'

- Finance – increasing levels of financial effectiveness and ensuring the council lives within its means
- Investment in People – introducing a leadership and management development programme for officers and elected members
- Work/life balance – investing in the workforce through well-being initiatives
- Performance management – improving processes that provide clearer oversight of delivery and improvement, enhance the role of elected members and look at performance more holistically
- Organisational culture – developing a more positive and proactive culture that encourages innovation and calculated risk-taking
- Communications – improving communications both internally and externally
- First impressions – improving customer access and communication to increase levels of customer satisfaction

64. Our view is that, through this plan, the authority is focusing on the correct changes and improvements to deliver better outcomes for local people. As outlined at the start of this report, there is a clear sense of momentum in the organisation and good initial progress has been made. Inevitably, given the internally-focused nature of many of the nine steps outlined above and the relatively short period of time since the plan was developed, the external benefits in terms of the impact on service delivery and customer satisfaction have still to be secured. Going forward, the nine step improvement plan needs to be understood by people in the organisation as being about core ways of working. Many people we spoke to referred to the nine steps as though they were an additional set of projects rather than being about the way the 'day job' is done.

65. There is a recognition in the organisation that the council doesn't deliver large scale change well. However, there are signs of progress with the recent management re-structure being seen by those concerned as having been delivered more effectively than the previous middle management review. Levels of self awareness in the organisation are growing, partly as a result of the CPA judgement serving to highlight a range of issues and an overall level of performance that people had perhaps previously been unwilling to face up to. However, there needs to be a greater acknowledgment of shortcomings, with some people we met, no doubt with the best of intentions, coming across as wishing to present the council in the best possible light and being unwilling to recognise weaknesses in the organisation, thus limiting, to a certain extent, the learning to be gleaned from the peer review. The chief executive is clearly keen to encourage greater openness within the organisation, along with managed risk taking. He has a determination to provide people with opportunities, encourage upward communication of thoughts and ideas, ensure there is no blame culture and celebrate success. However, changing organisational culture is not easy. It requires persistence and for everybody to play their part.

66. Whilst the authority has been working hard to enhance its project management and risk management capacity, there is still insufficient rigour in the authority in these disciplines and there would appear to be an acknowledgement of such in the organisation. The experience the council recently had in its efforts to deploy a third wheelie bin for people living in the borough perhaps provides the best example of this. Whilst a project management methodology has been

developed it will be early 2008 before it is rolled out through a training programme financially supported by Capital Ambition. The authority recognises the need to ensure that, once people are suitably trained, all of the projects in the council improvement programme are being managed using the methodology. It is also important that the monitoring of these projects is focused and risk-based. In terms of risk management, whilst risk registers and action plans to mitigate them are in place at corporate and directorate level and are kept under regular review, and risks are expected to be identified at the service level and reflected in service plans. However, reports on key decisions do not routinely assess risk and there would appear to be a way to go before risk management can be classed as embedded.

Organisation and managing people

- √ The revised directorate structure is seen to be more coherent
 - √ The council is clearly committed to investing in staff and elected members
 - √ The chief executive and senior politicians are actively engaging staff
 - √ The 'Individual Performance Appraisal and Development' process is seen as a good concept and have been well received by staff
- There is a widely held view that the council operates too much in silos
 - People are assuming there will be further structural change
 - Sickness absence levels in the authority are a cause for concern
 - The planned leadership, management and elected member training activities need to turn into a coherent reality
 - Budget limitations and work pressures are limiting training and development for staff
 - Internal communications have improved, but a mechanism for conveying ideas and feedback up through the organisation is needed and success needs to be better celebrated
67. The move to include all of the statutory posts, including the monitoring officer and Section 151 officer, on the corporate strategic board means the council is confident it now has adequate representation on this key body. The new directorate structure that has been put in place is seen by people in the organisation to be more coherent than before. Despite this and the recent management structure changes, which reduced the council's management costs by ten per cent or £2million, there is a widely held view that the council still operates too much in silos. This, combined with the fact that the management structure is confusing to people from outside the organisation, including ourselves and key partners, and the stated intention of the new chief executive to keep the new management structure under review, all means people are assuming there will be further structural change and they are envisaging that it will happen fairly soon. This is creating a set of expectations of the chief executive and causing a degree of uncertainty in the organisation and there would thus be benefit in the situation being clarified.
68. Internal communications have improved in the council, including efforts by the leader, deputy leader and chief executive to actively engage staff through the forums being held for them twice a year. There are regular managers' conferences and the three senior-most tiers of managers meet together every six weeks. In addition, the chief executive has launched a regular newsletter and is holding frequent lunch meetings with groups of around 20 staff from across the organisation in order to hear their views and ideas directly. Despite this and the existence of the staff achievement awards, the need exists for success to be better celebrated and for a mechanism to be put in place that systematically enables people to convey their ideas and feedback up through

the organisation, with the self assessment acknowledging that: "Staff engagement and morale require further attention". The council also needs to be aware that, during our discussions with staff, it became apparent that those working outside of the civic centre do not always receive the chief executive's newsletter and there are issues around the accessibility of the content.

69. The individual performance appraisal and development (IPAD) process, which takes place twice each year, involves managers and their members of staff reviewing performance, target setting and looking at support needs. Staff we spoke to view it positively and indicated that they find the dialogue constructive and helpful. It is important that maximum benefit is derived from this mechanism in terms of addressing the engagement and morale issues highlighted above. Monitoring of the scheme takes place through the improvement boards and the strategic performance report. Sickness absence levels in the authority are a cause for concern, with an average of more than 10 days per employee in both 2005/06 and 2006/07 meaning it is firmly established in the bottom quartile in London. Again, the IPAD process has a key role to play in helping to address this.
70. Whilst the council is clearly committed to investing in staff and elected members, it needs to be aware that training and development opportunities for staff are being limited by work pressures and budget limitations. Inevitably, given the financial position of the authority, resources dedicated to training and development are tight but it is the inconsistent approach across the different directorates regarding the allocation of funding that is causing the tensions, reflected in a sense of 'them and us'. Examples of the investment the council is making in staff and councillors include a leadership programme being developed for cabinet members, an elected member development programme commissioned from Roffey Park, at the heart of which will sit individually tailored personal development plans, and a series of joint workshops to be delivered by the Leadership Centre for Local Government for the cabinet and corporate strategic board aimed at enhancing the way they work together. A management development programme is also being established, supported by the Leadership Centre and Capital Ambition, which will look to build on training activity previously delivered through the 'Harrow Rules' training programme. It is important that all of these leadership, management and elected member training activities, which are currently still at the planning stage, turn into a coherent reality, especially given the fact that several different providers are involved.
71. The authority has plans for 11 managers to attend the 'future leaders' programme' delivered by the IDeA and it has traditionally supported around 50 staff each year in undertaking a Certificate or Diploma in Management Studies. Through the Learning4 Programme, up to 300 employees embark each year upon gaining an NVQ level 2. The 'Borough Beat' scheme sees the council staff release staff to be trained in and fulfil the role of special constables in a scheme that has now been rolled out across the Metropolitan Police area. The council is looking to extend further the valuing of its people by developing a series of work/life balance initiatives and a well-being programme. This will build on work that has already been undertaken developing a range of new staff benefits, including making childcare vouchers available. We would encourage the authority to ensure such initiatives and benefits are made relevant to as wide a range of staff as possible. With the strategy and business support directorate already having secured Investors in People (IIP) accreditation, the authority has an ambition to secure corporate accreditation in 2008/09.

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