Harrow COUNCIL
LONDON
Scrutiny

June 2008

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Report of the Scrutiny Challenge Panel

Council Improvement Programme

Members of the Challenge Panel

Cllr Paul Scott (Chairman)
Cllr Brian Gate
Cllr Mitzi Green
Cllr Richard Romain
Cllr Stanley Sheinwald

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CHAIRMAN'S INTRODUCTION & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Overview and Scrutiny committee was pleased to have been invited to participate in the development of the Council's Improvement Programme and I am delighted to have been able to chair this important investigation. The programme is designed to consolidate all of the various improvement plans deriving from a number of inspections that the authority has been through in the past 18 months. In so doing, it is hoped that it will provide a strategic focus to our internal processes and thus ensure that we are fit for purpose to deliver excellent services for our residents.

The challenge panel met on 4th June and we are grateful to those who provided us with the information upon which we based our challenge:

- Cllr Paul Osborn, Portfolio Holder for Performance, Communication and Corporate Services
- Michael Lockwood, Chief Executive
- Myfanwy Barret, Corporate Director Corporate Finance
- Lesley Clarke, Human Resources and Development Strategy Manager
- Carol Cutler, Director of Business Transformation and Customer Service
- Kireen Rooney, Programme Manager, Improvement Programme Team
- Tom Whiting, Divisional Director Strategy and Improvement

We would especially like to thank Chris Bowron, who has been seconded from the Improvement and Development Agency to support the development of the improvement programme for the particular support he provided to the panel in preparing its investigation.

This is a huge programme and is critical if the organisation is to improve its reputation and the services it delivers to local people. With this in mind we would welcome the opportunity to continue to engage with officers and portfolio holders to ensure the effective delivery of projects. To this end we intent to make a number of recommendations to the Overview and Scrutiny committee regarding additional projects and monitoring processes. These are included in our findings and recommendations below.

Cllr Paul Scott , Chairman Council Improvement Programme Challenge Panel

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BACKGROUND

During the last 18 months, the council has been subject to a number of external performance assessments. These have included:

- Corporate assessment – December 2006
- Use of Resources score – annually
- Improvement and Development Agency peer review – December 2007
- Access to Services Inspection – March 2008

Each of these assessments identified ways in which the council needs to improve some of its corporate processes and functions if it is to be able to support overall improvement in the delivery of services to local people.

In order to respond to the findings of the assessments, the council has developed the council improvement programme to be delivered between now and 2011. The programme will be considered by Cabinet on 19th June.

All of the above assessments have drawn attention to the need for the council to improve some of its fundamental processes if it is to realise its ambition to be one of the best in London by 2012. By co-ordinating action in a single, combined programme the council hopes to ensure that actions are being targeted at the most important areas, that action is delivering real change and that the organisation is collectively focussed on improvement. A piecemeal approach to service improvement will not bring the step change that is required.

The Overview and Scrutiny committee was asked to provide challenge to the assumptions behind and the focus of the council improvement programme, the action proposed and the anticipated outcomes. In order to do this, it is a challenge panel was proposed.

The panel took place on 4th June 2008 as a round-table discussions between scrutiny councillors, council officers and the portfolio holder for Performance, Communication and Corporate Services. At the meeting the panel received detailed information on the content of the plan and was able to question and make recommendations on specific elements of the content and also to raise a number of strategic questions in relation to the delivery of the programme.

The panel comprised:
- Cllr Paul Scott (Chairman)
- Cllr Brian Gate
- Cllr Mitzi Green
- Cllr Richard Romain
- Cllr Stanley Sheinwald
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The scope for the investigation was agreed by the Overview and Scrutiny committee in May and is attached as Appendix One

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

KEY OBSERVATIONS

The challenge panel's observations are summarised in the paragraphs below:

Overarching
- The development of the council improvement programme is long overdue and the panel wishes to put on record its gratitude to the Chief Executive and his colleagues for the production of the programme. We endorse its overall direction and recognise that it is clearly attempting a comprehensive response to the organisation's weaknesses. It is a welcome development.

- A key theme in the justification of the programme is the need for consistency in organisational procedures. We thoroughly endorse this.

- This is a huge programme of work. Whilst the panel acknowledges that this is inevitable if proper co-ordination of all of the disparate improvement projects and plans is to be achieved, we would stress that the council must have robust monitoring processes in place to oversee its successful overall delivery. We anticipate the scrutiny function, both Overview and Scrutiny committee and the Performance and Finance sub committee, playing a role in supporting the monitoring of the programme.

- We would also seek assurances that monitoring processes are sufficiently rigorous to ensure that we learn from the projects currently being undertaken and that we learn from failures. We see this programme as key to our improvement, it should take us forward and not be forced to continually address past failure.

- In the time available, we were not able to raise specific questions with regard to the overall governance of the programme but we would urge that the organisation ensures a robust system is put in place.

- The size of the programme means that in the time available, we do not feel that we have been able to devote adequate time to consideration of the detail in a number of the streams. In particular, we believe that the HR stream is critical to the success of the programme: if the council's staff are not properly equipped to undertake the tasks or are lacking in motivation as a result of poor morale, then the programme, no matter how well financially resourced, runs a serious risk of failure. With that in mind we will propose to the Overview and Scrutiny committee that it pays particular attention to the delivery of this theme.

- In the context of the HR stream we would also endorse the assertion of the need for managers to manage. This is critical to the delivery of the programme. However, we would also hope that managers are given the tools to manage and would also seek assurances that, in particular the importance of the middle management tier is acknowledged and that the morale of this critical layer of the organisation is supported. We look forward to receiving further advice on the implementation of the Management Development Programme, via the Corporate Effectiveness Lead Members.

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Council Improvement Programme Challenge Panel, June 2008

- Whilst we recognise and endorse the need for a robust managerial approach to some of the difficulties faced by the organisation, we would suggest that whilst a 'stick' may be an appropriate solution in some circumstances, a 'carrot' will also support the delivery of improvement and may have a more positive impact upon morale. In the context of the example given to us, we would be interested to understand the broader impact of the sanctions for absence on the morale of the staff in question.

- Also in the context of rewards and sanctions we are particularly interested in the penalty likely to result from failure to deliver on key projects. Whilst we would urge clarity for the organisation on what constitutes 'failure', we would also comment that blockages to this crucial programme must be addressed in the most vigorous manner if the future of the organisation and all of its staff and services to our residents are not to be jeopardised.

- It is perhaps disappointing that we appear to be at such an embryonic stage in our journey to improvement. A number of projects discussed at the panel meeting were at the foundation stage or indeed proposed the implementation of systems that should, by now, have been part and parcel of the council's core activities - we refer here specifically to the use of complaints information. Delay in the delivery of improvement and modernisation of processes can put the council at risk and it is heartening to see that action is now being taken to put this right.

- In this context, we would also seek assurances regarding the process for ongoing development of the programme, its 'evolution'. It is critical that the programme, whilst obviously being monitored in its own right, is rooted in the service planning and performance monitoring processes of the council in order that it is able to respond to changes in need, best practice and priorities. It will not evolve in a vacuum.

- We would also comment on the inter-relationship of the various streams. Obviously these need a degree of separation for management purposes. However, as we alluded to in our discussions, the interrelationship between a number of projects and streams is clear. We would urge that the governance structures ensure that the interdependency of projects, for example, those relating to staff sickness, staff morale and customer care is not lost in the pursuit of individual project targets.

- Time did not allow us to address the issue of sequencing of the projects and streams and we would urge the Chief Executive and his project sponsors to ensure that all of the components of the improvement programme are implemented in a timely and appropriately sequenced manner.

Specific
During the panel a number of specific comments were made and these are summarised below:

Access to Services
- Greater attention needs to be given to the first impression given by staff to visitors in to the civic centre. In particular, the entrance to Civic One is gloomy and often overcrowded and thus confusing. This does not relay a message of competence to those using the civic centre.
- Decisions regarding definition of 'avoidable contact' need to be made consistently

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Finance IT and Risk
- Whilst quick wins may be financially attractive, the council must ensure that in the long term these quick wins do not have a detrimental on service delivery and residents – the organisation must have a clear analysis of the long-term impact of decisions.
- There may be a number of opportunities for the development of partnership with local business in order to improve procurement performance. Whilst these local organisations may not have the profile of some of the larger suppliers, by working with them, the council may be able to broker effective contracts and can also support the development of the local economy.

Human Resources
- The organisation needs to be aware of the many influences that contribute to high sickness levels
- As councillors are as much a part of the improvement process as officers, some form of appraisal process should be introduced for members
- The pilot of the Management Development Programme for middle managers should be fully evaluated before the First Line Manager Programme is rolled out in order to sure that any amendments in the former are reflected in the latter.
- The process of 'succession planning' might be more usefully focussed on 'career planning'. Improving the career prospects of staff can mean that staff morale can be boosted and the council may be able to retain more of its staff.
- Resources for the HR stream is crucial and the panel does not wish to see any projects 'de-prioritised'. It is critical that sufficient resources are found to deliver this stream.

Cross Cutting
- The overall programme of projects will benefit from external peer/non executive director input where appropriate
- The impact of additional performance requests from central government and of running both the council improvement programme and service review programme on the organisation, whilst all necessary to resolve funding issues, should be monitored.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

The council improvement programme challenge panel recommends that:

- the findings of the challenge panel are referred to cabinet for consideration with the council improvement programme on 19th June
- the report is referred to the Overview and Scrutiny committee for endorsement
- the report to the Overview and Scrutiny committee includes a recommendation regarding the need to
    a. monitor the implementation of the programme overall
    b. monitor a number of specific components of the programme in more detail

CONCLUSION

The panel thoroughly endorses the council improvement programme, our observations are not meant as criticisms but hopefully as comments that will help support the ongoing development of the programme and ultimately the delivery of improved services to our residents. Where we have made, or indeed make in future, suggestions for amendments to the programme, we hope they are helpful

We are extremely grateful for the opportunity to have contributed to the development of the programme. This programme belongs to all of us, staff, managers, backbench councillors and cabinet members, we look forward to offering further support in the future

Council Improvement Programme Challenge Panel
5th June 2008

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Council Improvement Programme Challenge Panel, June 2008

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COUNCIL IMPROVEMENT PROGRAMME CHALLENGE PANEL - DRAFT SCOPE

1	**SUBJECT**	Council Improvement Programme Challenge Panel
2	**COMMITTEE**	Overview and Scrutiny
3	**REVIEW GROUP**	Cllr Sheinwald Cllr Green Cllr Versallion Cllr Gate TBC
4	**AIMS/ OBJECTIVES/ OUTCOMES**	To support the development of the council's council improvement programme
5	**MEASURES OF SUCCESS OF REVIEW**	• The panel is able to provide effective challenge to the improvement programme • Cabinet welcome the comments made by the panel
6	**SCOPE**	The panel will: • Challenge the assumptions upon which the revised council improvement programme is based • Challenge the focus of the action proposed • Consider the appropriateness of the action proposed • Challenge the effectiveness of the action proposed
7	**SERVICE PRIORITIES (Corporate/Dept)**	Improve the way we work
8	**REVIEW SPONSOR**	Michael Lockwood, Chief Executive
9	**ACCOUNTABLE MANAGER**	Tom Whiting, Divisional Director Strategy and Improvement
10	**SUPPORT OFFICER**	Lynne McAdam, Service Manager Scrutiny
11	**ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT**	From existing resources
12	**EXTERNAL INPUT**	None

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13	**METHODOLOGY**	Summary papers outlining context for the development of the improvement plan: • I&DeA Peer Review report • Corporate assessment outcomes • CPA outcomes • Access Harrow inspection report Development of key lines of enquiry Round table panel discussion to investigate four areas of scope with: • Divisional Director, Strategy and Improvement • Divisional Director HR & Development • Director of Business Transformation and Customer Services • Corporate Director Corporate Finance • Improvement Programme Consultant
14	**EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS**	The council improvement programme is designed to support the council in its ambition to become one of the best councils in London by 2012. In delivering this ambition, the council will support the delivery of excellent services to one of the most diverse communities in London.
15	**ASSUMPTIONS/ CONSTRAINTS**	The costs of the challenge panel will be met from within existing resources
16	**SECTION 17 IMPLICATIONS**	None specific
17	**TIMESCALE**	The timetable for completion of the challenge panel means that it must take place between 21st March and 7th June
18	**RESOURCE COMMITMENTS**	Lynne McAdam, Service Manager Scrutiny
19	**REPORT AUTHOR**	Lynne McAdam, Service Manager Scrutiny
20	**REPORTING ARRANGEMENTS**	Outline of formal reporting process: To Service Director [√] When by 7th June 2008 To Portfolio Holder [ ] When………………..... To CMT [ ] When……………….... To Cabinet [√] When 19th June 2008
21	**FOLLOW UP ARRANGEMENTS (proposals)**	TBC