

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MINUTES

21 JULY 2010

Chairman: * Councillor Jerry Miles

Councillors:

* Sue Anderson	* Paul Osborn
* Kam Chana	* Bill Phillips
* Ann Gate	* Sachin Shah
* Barry Macleod-Cullinane	* Stephen Wright

Voting Co-opted:

(Voluntary Aided)	(Parent Governors)
† Mrs J Rammelt Reverend P Reece	Mrs D Speel

* Denotes Member present
† Denotes apologies received

RESOLVED ITEMS

12. Attendance by Reserve Members

RESOLVED: To note that there were no Reserve Members in attendance at this meeting.

13. Declarations of Interest

RESOLVED: To note that there were no declarations of interests made by Members.

14. Deputations

RESOLVED: To note that no deputations were received.

15. Question and Answer Session with the Leader and the Chief Executive

On behalf of the Committee, the Chairman welcomed the Leader of the Council and the Chief Executive to the meeting. It was explained that the purpose of the meeting was to allow consideration of the Better Deal for Residents Programme and the Council's finances. The Chairman added that as the current administration had only been in office since May 2010, it was expected that the Question and Answer session would not be as in depth as usual. However, he added that this was a valued opportunity for Members to discuss issues with the Leader and the Chief Executive and that the Committee looked forward to hearing their views.

Q – What plans does the Council have to engage with residents on the Better Deal for Residents programme and is the Council willing to engage at ward / constituency level?

A – The Leader stated that the Better Deal for Residents programme would significantly alter the way in which the Council operated and that engagement with residents was essential. In order to accomplish this, the Council would actively seek dialogue with various bodies, including trade unions, resident panels, the Community Cohesion Reference Group, the Disability Forum and the Harrow Strategic Partnership. The Council would also ensure residents were kept up-to-date by publicising significant developments. The Leader added that one strand of the Better Deal for Residents programme was to promote civic engagement amongst residents.

The Chief Executive stated that Ward Councillors were best placed to feed back the views and concerns of residents to the Council. He added that the Council needed to develop a new type of relationship with residents, in line with the Better Together initiative.

Q – Following the decision of Central Government to cut public sector spending by £6.2 billion in 2010/11, can you provide details of how the Council intends make in year funding cuts of £1.3 million?

The Chief Executive stated that the Council intended to deliver savings of £1.3 million through vacancy management and careful spending. He added that certain areas of the Business Transformation Project could be brought forward and that the Council would consider income opportunities including car parking charges, sponsorship, and adult services. The Leader stated that the Council had only recently been made aware of the in year funding cuts and no firm decisions had yet been made. However, it was accepted that there was a need to make decisions quickly. The Chief Executive stated that the Council faced an immense challenge as income was falling but demand for services was increasing.

Q – Will the review of special needs transport result in a change to the eligibility criteria?

The Chief Executive stated that the Council was reviewing almost every service to identify potential savings. In the case of special needs transport, the Council would be considering many possibilities including the way in which vehicles were purchased, whether they could be shared with other boroughs, the use of volunteers and improved route planning. The Leader stated that the Council would also be considering whether certain individuals could be encouraged to be more independent, although this would depend on many factors taking into account the individual circumstances of the service user. The Council would also be reviewing the way in which it assessed individuals to ensure the process was as efficient as possible.

Q – Will the Council consider boosting apprenticeships in Harrow through local authority contracts?

The Leader stated that the Council already supported apprenticeship schemes and had itself created work experience and graduate positions. The Housing Association had also created many new apprenticeship opportunities. The Chief Executive stated that the Council hoped to work with the National Apprenticeship scheme in the future.

Q – How was the decision to apply pro-rata budget cuts on frontline service areas reached?

The Leader stated that the Council had followed the same process as it had under the previous administration. He explained that all the Corporate Directors had been told to consider the proposed budget cuts and determine the potential impact on their service area. The Chief Executive added that the Council was initially looking at achieving the required savings in a uniform manner.

Q – What are the Council's current reserves and how do these compare with the figure recommended by the Section 151 Officer?

A – The Leader stated that £5 million to £7 million was considered a reasonable reserve level and that the Council was well within this band. The Chief Executive stated that the Council needed to strike a balance between saving money and investing in services.

Q – Will the financial problems facing NHS Harrow impact on the Council's plans, including the Sustainable Community Plan?

A – The Chief Executive stated that a presentation was due to be given to the Harrow Strategic Partnership at its meeting on 22 July 2010 which would provide the Council with an update on the current situation. At present it was difficult to assess the potential impact on the Council's plans as there were too many uncertainties.

Q – Following the Governments announcement that they will increase VAT, how does the Council intend to protect those on low incomes?

A – The Leader of the Council stated that the current administration was interested in introducing an additional Corporate Priority which would aim to help residents and businesses cope with the recession. The Council also had a dedicated team which could give advice to those facing financial hardship.

The Chief Executive added that the Council was working closely with the Citizens Advice Bureau, was in the process of establishing a Credit Union for residents and was considering the possibility of allowing individuals to spread Council Tax payments over a period of 12 months.

Q – What help is being provided to Young People in Harrow to help them gain employment?

A – The Leader of the Council stated that the Connexions Service was working closely with young people in Harrow by providing advice on training and employment opportunities. In addition, the Harrow Skills Centre was providing vocational learning for the 14-19 age range with courses providing an introduction to the key trades. Harrow Schools and Colleges were also providing many opportunities to students. Youth workers also undertook outreach work to ensure those not in the education system had access to information and support.

Q – What impact has the financial situation of the Council had on staff morale?

A – The Chief Executive stated that the Council ensured that all staff were kept informed of significant developments through regular internal communications and staff forums. In addition, staff were being asked to submit ideas that could help the Council save money. The Chief Executive added that staff recognised that the financial problems were not unique to Harrow and that all local authorities were in a similar situation. The Leader added that the Council continued to celebrate the success of staff through the CREATE Awards.

Q – Can the Leader of the Council assure the Committee that the Council will continue to support Grant funding?

A – The Leader stated that, as a result of NHS Harrow suspending its grants programme, the Council was expecting to see increased applications for grants. The way in which the Council operated its Grants process was currently under review.

Q – What plans does the Council have to promote the growth of the town centre?

A – The Council was in the process of developing its Core Strategy which would provide a clear spatial strategy for the Borough. The Core Strategy would be a forward looking document that sought to pro-actively plan for and manage growth and development in Harrow. The Council had also recently

established the Major Developments Panel which would oversee the development of the Harrow and Wealdstone Intensification Area. The Panel would also consider significant development opportunities across the borough. The Council was also looking to regenerate local centres.

Q – The Council recently announced that Gayton Library will be open on Sunday. How much will this cost?

A – The Leader stated that opening the Library on Sunday would cost the Council an additional £20,000 per year. The cost would be absorbed within the Community and Environment budget.

Q – The current administration has previously stated that it will seek to reduce car parking charges across the Borough. Does the Council still plan to do this?

A – The Leader stated that the Council would be reviewing car parking costs across the borough to ensure fairness and consistency. The Council was considering a number of options although no decisions had yet been made. The Chief Executive added that the income the Council received from parking charges, as a percentage, was lower than most other London authorities. However, raising car parking charges was just one of many options and the Council would always consider the impact that any such change would have on residents.

Q - Is it possible to ring-fence from cuts all Children's and Adults' services that deliver care in the community, either at the expense of another service, or by a rise in Council Tax?

A – The Chief Executive stated that the current financial environment meant that the Council had no choice but to make significant savings. However, as the Council had already made significant savings in previous years, identifying further efficiency savings was very difficult. The Council would need to look at every service it offered, including those that were a statutory requirement, in order to identify where cuts could be made without jeopardising quality of service. The Chief Executive added that the Council would continue to protect vulnerable people and had in the previous year increased the budget of Adult Services to reflect changing demographics. The Leader stated that the Council acknowledged that initial investment could sometimes result in long-term savings.

Q – Why is the Community and Environment directorate reporting an anticipated overspend of £935,000?

A – The Committee was informed that the Council had overestimated the revenue that would be generated through car parking charges for the first quarter of 2010/11. Action was being taken to address this miscalculation.

Q – Will the Council continue to provide financial support for additional Police presence in the town centre?

A – The Leader stated that the additional Police presence cost the Council £250,000 per year and that this financial support would continue.

Q – Will the Council be signing up to the 10:10 Charter?

A – The Leader stated that this was a long-term aspiration, although much work was still required.

Q – Do you feel that the Capita Review has penetrated deep enough into the organisation?

A – The Chief Executive stated that the Capita Review had been both positive and challenging. As with any organisation, some resistance to external advice had to be expected and there had been some initial frustration over the speed of progress. However, the work that had been carried out was of a high quality and had focused on areas of the Council that had the potential to produce the biggest benefits.

Q – In light of the Council's ambition to work increasingly closely with the Voluntary Sector, are there concerns that this may in some respects undermine its independence from the state?

A – The Leader stated that the Council strongly supported independence of the Voluntary Sector, acknowledging the need for advocacy services such as the Citizens Advice Bureau. The Chief Executive added that the Council enjoyed a good relationship with the Voluntary Sector and was seeking to empower and build its capacity. The Council also acknowledged that it could learn from the Voluntary Sector and was actively encouraging staff to volunteer through the 1-4-1 scheme.

Q – As part of the Core Strategy, the Council is seeking to promote development within the Harrow & Wealdstone Intensification Area. How will the Council manage the increased density in an area where there are already socio-economic inequalities?

A – Development within the Intensification Area would not be unregulated and the Council was currently developing a comprehensive action plan to ensure a balance between new residential buildings and businesses. The newly established Major Developments Panel would also look at significant development proposals to consider the impact on the area.

Q – How is the Council ensuring that its published Service Standards are adhered to?

A – The Chief Executive informed the Committee that the Council had taken a number of steps to ensure residents received a good quality of service. These included the introduction of a new complaints process, mystery shopping and training programmes for staff. However, it was accepted that mistakes would sometimes occur and that it was important that residents notified the Council

when things went wrong. He stated that residents were right to expect high standards and that any failings needed to be acknowledged and acted upon.

Q – What are the top priorities for the Council at present?

A – The Chief Executive stated that there was a genuine desire for the Council to operate more openly and to give residents the opportunity to become more involved in the issues that affected them. This was especially important in the current financial environment as the Council needed to know which services were most valued by residents.

Q – Why were the views of the Business Transformation Partnership Panel not sought when the I.T. strategy was being considered?

A – The Leader stated that the process for consultation had been determined by the previous administration. The Chief Executive added that the Council was always happy to have external advice and would look into the matter.

Q – In light of pressure on the Housing budget, is the Council considering bringing forward rent increases?

A – The Leader stated that the Council was currently reviewing this area and no decisions would be made until the review had been completed.

Q – When is the next Public Question Time event due to take place?

A – The Leader stated that no decision had yet been made, although the Council was unsure whether Public Question Time events were an efficient way to engage with residents. He added that previous events had been poorly attended.

Q – Is there a danger that the Homecare re-ablement scheme, designed to care for people in their own homes, could lead to widespread social isolation?

A – Members were informed that the re-ablement scheme had been instigated as many individuals wanted to receive care services in a home setting. Importantly, individuals would continue to receive quality care and support.

In closing, the Chief Executive stated that he found the Question and Answer Overview and Scrutiny meetings useful and was happy to attend. He requested that, in the future, Members give notice of areas they would like to discuss. He added that this would allow a deeper and more focused discussion and debate. The Leader agreed that this would be helpful for future meetings.

(Note: The meeting, having commenced at 7.30 pm, closed at 9.32 pm).

(Signed) COUNCILLOR JERRY MILES
Chairman