

# **Cabinet**

## **Background Papers**

**Date:** **Thursday 10 February 2022**

### **Agenda - Part I**

- KEY 11. Final Revenue Budget 2022/23 and Medium-Term Financial Strategy 2022/23 to 2024/25 (Pages 3 - 16)**

References from the Employees' Consultative Forum, Harrow Business Consultative Panel and the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to the report of the Director of Finance.

- KEY 15. Borough Plan Update (Pages 17 - 24)**

Reference from the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to the report of the Chief Executive.

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# Employees' Consultative Forum

## Minutes

### 12 January 2022

**Present:**

**Chair:** Councillor Natasha Proctor

**Councillors:** Camilla Bath Mina Parmar  
Philip Benjamin Varsha Parmar  
Angella Murphy-Strachan Sachin Shah

**Teacher** -

**Representatives:**  
**Unison** Ms S Haynes Mr J Royle  
**Representatives:** Mr D Searles

**GMB** Ms P Belgrave  
**Representative:** Ms A Jones

**Apologies** Louise Crimmins Anne Lyons  
**received:**

**Absent:**

### Resolved Items

**78. Draft Revenue Budget 2022/23 and draft Medium Term Financial Strategy 2022/23 to 2024/25**

The Forum received a report of the Director of Finance and Assurance, which set out the draft revenue budget for 2022/23 and the draft Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) for 2022/23 to 2024/25 which had been considered

by Cabinet at its meeting in December 2021. The report also referenced that the budget and the MTFS would be brought back to Cabinet in February 2022 for final approval and with a recommendation to full Council.

The Director of Finance and Assurance introduced the report and informed the Forum that the approach taken by the Council to the budget setting process was different to that of previous years. There was a legal requirement for the Council to deliver a balanced budget and, in order to do this, the Council was proposing to manage the budget gap for 2022/23 by using its reserves of £15.7m as a one-off measure to 'plug' the budget gap. The Director added that it was not ideal to use reserves to manage budget gaps but the alternative was to make immediate substantial cuts which would not be sustainable. She added that the Council was working on a strategy for future years with a view to managing the gap over the MTFS.

The Director responded to a question from a Member on the interest rate income that would be lost if reserves were withdrawn and used to manage the funding gap for 2022/23. She explained that the loss of interest would be marginal compared to other measures. She reiterated that there was a legal requirement on the Council to set a balanced budget for 2022/23.

A Unison representative asked how the loss of reserves would be funded in future years. The Director referred to table 1 (summary of key financial changes 2013/14 to 2022/23) and table 2 (changes to MTFS – prior to indicated finance settlement) of her report and explained that a further saving of £14.8m would have to be found in future years. For example, this could be achieved by restructuring debt and/or reducing expenditure. She added that various assumptions had been built-in, such as additional grant settlements from the government, an increase in Council Tax of 2.99% per annum, demographic of Harrow and expected inflation levels.

The Unison representative urged caution in that whilst an increase or a change in demographic could result in an increase in Council Tax, it would also mean that more Council services would be required and provided for. The Director of Finance acknowledged this point and stated that contingencies/growth would always be put in place.

The Director responded to additional questions from Unison and GMB representatives as follows:

- How would the sale of the Civic Centre site impact on the budget? The Director informed the Forum that this question was related to the HSPB (Harrow Strategic Partnership Board) where the Council will be putting in the Civic Centre land and equity over the period of the HSPB. She added that the Council would receive capital receipts, interest and dividends in future years;
- What would be the Impact on the Council and its staff if budget gaps could not be met? The Director stated it was crucial that the Council reduced its expenditure to meet future funding gaps and lived within its budget envelope. The challenge was how this could be done in a safe manner so that staff and residents were not put at risk. It was

important that the Council had a strategy in place setting out its plan for the next two years. The Council's budget was also dependant on the grant it received from the government. The Council needed to learn to manage the various pressures within the budget envelope in order to deliver balanced budgets in future years.

**RESOLVED:** That the report be noted and the comments made by the Forum be referred to the February 2022 meeting of the Cabinet for consideration.

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# **Harrow Business Consultative Panel**

## **Minutes**

### **20 January 2022**

**Present:**

**Chair:** Councillor Jeff Anderson

**Councillors:** Kiran Ramchandani Norman Stevenson

**Apologies  
received:** Councillor Bharat Thakker

#### **Resolved Items**

**21. Draft Revenue Budget 2022-23 and draft Medium-Term Financial  
Strategy 2022-23 to 2024-25**

Members received a report of the Director of Finance which set out the Council's proposed Draft Revenue Budget 2022/23 and the Medium Term Financial Strategy 2022/23 to 2024/25.

The Panel did not raise any comments or questions on the report. However, Members noted the absence of business representatives and, given that the meeting provided a valuable opportunity for input and consultation on the annual council budget, suggested that further endeavours be undertaken towards encouraging the business community to attend.

**RESOLVED:** That the report be noted.

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## **Cabinet – 10 February 2022**

### **Reference from the Overview and Scrutiny Committee – 11 January 2022**

#### **193. Question and Answer Session with the Leader of the Council and the Chief Executive**

The Chair opened the Question and Answer session. He outlined the order of the session, stating that the Committee would first receive a presentation on the Council's strategic overview from the Chief Executive. The Committee would then move on to a question and answer session, focusing on the following priority areas:

In his opening statement, the Chief Executive provided a brief update on the Council's strategic overview, outlining a number of key points:

- The last 20 months had been dominated by the Covid-19 Pandemic, which had presented a substantial challenge for Harrow Council which had heavily impacted: Harrow Council's budget; the capacity of Harrow Council and finally the Government's spending review had been delayed and had not been released until October 2021.
- It was hoped that by May 2022 Harrow Council would be less dominated by the Covid-19 pandemic and due to the Government's spending review release and a settlement prior to Christmas there would be a greater degree of financial certainty.
- Ongoing response to Covid-19 had remained a priority for Harrow Council and how core services would be delivered as a result of the Covid-19 Pandemic.
- Key priorities would be continued to be worked on, these included the regeneration programme, the borough plan, modernisation plans and the medium-term financial strategy with planning for 2023/24.
- Medium term plans included: Covid-19 recovery plans, borough plan activities and for the regeneration plan to be delivered.

Members thanked the Chief for his statement. In the session which followed, questions centred around several key areas as set out below.

**Q1. Since 2010 there had been a large cut to the money coming into the Council from the Government, what was the impact of these cuts?**

The Chief Executive explained that Harrow Council's core grant received from the Government in 2010 was circa £50m compared to today's core grant of £1 to £2m and that there had been a long period of austerity in the amount of resources councils had received from the Government, which had led to decisions to be made by Harrow Council in order for the budgets to be balanced, but that council funding had been more stable compared to the previous ten years.

The Leader of the Council added that since 2015 the overall revenue support grant had dropped from £52m to £1m and that small percentage annual increases of circa £50,000 limited the council on what could be done for pressures in their millions to be mitigated. In addition, over the past few years only 1-year settlements were received which had made long term planning difficult. Secondly, though core government funding had increased so had the need for council tax to be raised. It was noted that 80% of Harrow's expenditure is now funded by council tax compared to circa 50% in other London authorities'. He concluded that cuts had impacted Harrow Council.

**Q2. What were our guiding principles for formulating this budget?**

The Portfolio Holder for Finance and Resources explained that Harrow Council had been a low funded Council, that it was essential for the budget to be balanced and that services needed to be delivered. There remained a priority to protect vulnerable people within the community and for those on the lowest incomes to be supported had been a guiding principle. In addition, financial prudence in order for shortfalls to be met from funding no longer received and thanked the directorate at Harrow Council for their continued efforts in delivering services within budget.

The Leader of the Council added that where costs could be reduced they had been but also there had been investment into services in order for these services, albeit small, but these had been done well.

**Q3. The budget gap of £15.7m, it appears that that this had been met by the budget planning reserve and that by next year that would need to be reversed out, which would imply that there was going to have to be savings in the year in order to in order to enable that gap to be reversed out. What were the plans for addressing that and what do you have in mind achieve the savings necessary to be able to reverse out that call on the reserves?**

The Chief Executive clarified that due to a lack of clarity and a delay from government on their position regarding the medium-term financial settlement, it was a strategic decision to do everything the council could over recent years to grow the budget planning reserve in order to have the resources available in the absence of the medium-term financial settlement. The Chief Executive concluded to say that because of this decision, the budget for 2022/23 had been balanced and that there was no need to make any further savings to balance 2022/23. The substantial increase in the budget planning reserve

had allowed the Council time to understand what would be needed for the 2023/24 budget for the medium term to be balanced. This would also allow for a new administration's priorities to be applied to the future budget.

**Q4. Could the budget gap be dealt with by the increased Government funding that would come from the medium-term strategy?**

The Chief Executive explained that Harrow Council had no clarity on Government policy regarding updates on the spending review for local government. The announcement came during October 2021 which had allocated resources to the spending departments over the medium term. This had provided a greater degree of clarity. Prior to this it had been unknown how much of the projected budget gap could be filled by additional government funding and that the final budget report would reflect the new information. The additional budget resource had not closed the budget gap and that proposals by the Council would need to be developed by February 2023 for how the budget gap would be filled.

The Member went on to ask if it would be up to the next administration to find the necessary savings or extra income in order to fill the budget gap. The Chief Executive explained that there had not always been £15m in the budget planning reserve, it had been a deliberate strategy in order for the Council to be prepared in the face of uncertainty for 2022/23 and that it was not required for this reserve to be replenished. The Chief Executive agreed that the challenge would be for the budget to be balanced for 2023/24.,

**Q5. On the point of the spending review, what had been assumed as the government settlement for next year in the draft budget compared to where we think things have come out?**

The Director of Finance explained that the indicative financial settlement meant that Harrow Council would be better off by £1m compared to what had been estimated in the draft budget. This meant that the Council would reduce the level of reserves by £1m to balance the 2022/23 budget

**Q6. What are the biggest risks within the budget both in terms of 2022/23 and the medium-term?**

The Director of Finance explained that one of the biggest risks identified across local authorities had been meeting demand for social care, however Harrow Council had continued to develop their service and provide growth and along with a reserve in place, this had ultimately led to a lot of risks mitigated. In addition, due to Harrow Council's chosen strategy the budget could be managed within the budget envelope. In terms of the medium term the biggest challenge identified was for the ability to bring expenditure back in line with the budget. In addition, the impact of inflation, rise in national insurance and energy costs had been identified as a future challenge.

The Portfolio Holder for Finance and Resources added that the lack of clarity over what the financial settlement would be had been a challenge and for capacity to be identified in all departments and for our current position to be maintained.

The Leader of the Council added that the backlog within the hospital system had also been noted to be challenge presented to the Council, with additional demands and staff shortages put on social care were deemed as financial and social concerns.

**Q7. It was important to remember that when looking at the budget figures that every reduction of difficulty directly affects peoples lives. In 2010/11 48,000 people were homeless, by 2019/20 there were 92,000 homeless people. Do we know if that upward trend continued, both in terms of finance on council spending in terms of providing extra accommodation but also the social impact this had, could you make comments on these figures please?**

The Director of Finance explained that the number of homeless households in temporary accommodation had doubled of a ten-year period and that there were a number of families that remained on the list for temporary accommodation.

The Chief Executive added that one of the pressures within London, due to the housing market had been the cost of temporary accommodation and that there had not been enough social housing as well as a rising cost in social housing over this period time. The Council had done a number of things for this to be mitigated, such as input £30m into a scheme that allowed property to be bought by councils. While this had been a driver around the management of the revenue budget this had linked to the council regeneration plans in order for our supply of affordable housing to be increased.

**Q8. How had the £15m budget planning reserve been generated?**

The Director of Finance explained that it had been generated from previous years underspends including capital financing where the Council had not needed to borrow as per budgeted plans. . If directorate budgets had not been spent in year then this would also be transferred to the reserve and it was an accumulation of these over a 5 to 6 year period that had resulted in what could be seen in the budget planning reserve.

**Q9. Could the 1.9% rise in council tax be avoided if circa £6m could be found throughout the next financial year?**

The Chief Executive explained that there was a difference between the use of a one-off resource and a recurring resource and that a rise in council tax would act as a permanent resource within the budget. While it had been sensible to use a one off resource to gain time in order to not remove money from the budget a recurring resource would allow for long term stability.

The Leader of the Council added that one off grants had not helped the council in terms of budget planning for the future, there would be no guarantee of find that money each year through one off resources.

**Q10. What was the process to cope with the £15m cuts next year?**

The Director of Finance explained that an underspend would need to be achieved in the year so that drawdowns from reserves would be avoided and to allow for year end capacity to be realised. Therefore, planned borrowing would be avoided where possible and for the treasury to be robustly managed in order to be under budget. In addition, a strategy would need to be implemented in how Harrow Council would lower its expenditure. The Director of Finance acknowledged that this would be a challenge.

The Director of Finance added that there is an option for this to be undertaken over a two-year period with a priority set for immediate savings to be realised within 2022/23 budget but that bigger decision would be considered over a two-year period.

The Chair of the Committee noted that If this had been done, then dependant on the underspend there would be very little capacity left in the reserve budget, there would be around £5m and that the underspend would have to be quite large for this be met, notwithstanding anything that could happen next year.

**Q11. This year the Council took out £2m of savings because it didn't have capacity to make those savings because of the pandemic and wanted to understand the capacity if this year the council was unable to save £2m but to have capacity to save £14m for 2022/23?**

The Chief Executive explained that the Council were unable to identify savings throughout 2021/22 because of the pandemic, however there was confidence that the Council would be in a good position to smooth the budget gap over more than one year. The Chief Executive noted that that the medium-term financial strategy could identify how this budget gap could be bridged and that it meant that there was a need for it to be managed over a longer period of time.

**Q12. Regarding children services, was there a reserve budget for this service, also with regard to demand of children in care, mental health, backlogs for the educational health care plans and assessments. So as it was a demanding service there was concern that savings for this service had been exhausted. Therefore, what caveats had been put in place with reserves just in case to help this service?**

The Director of Finance explained that demand for children services had seen a rise which had been seen in the last few years prior. There was a children's social care reserve in place with circa £1m in place, it was planned to be used in 2022/23 because a forecast pressure had been identified. Permanent growth had been built into the budget for year two of medium-term strategy and that the growth requirement will be regularly reviewed

**Q13. The budget gap of £14.8m, there had not appeared to be a plan as it stood to close that gap in either 1 year or 2 years, was that not a black hole? Was this budget as it stands passing on a blackhole to the next administration to somehow deal with over the next 1 or 2 financial years?**

The Chief Executive clarified that there had been budget gaps over the medium-term financial strategy in past years and that it had not been unusual for there to not be a detailed plan at this point in time, where a three-year settlement had not been provided. The Chief Executive added that financial savings could have been implemented prior to knowledge of the settlement which had only been provided after the draft budget plan had been published.

The Member added that clarity within the budget as to how the budget gap could be met was desired and that it would be useful for these details to have been in place.

The Chair noted that on this occasion that for year one of the medium-term strategy to be balanced by reserves could be said to be unusual compared to previous years.

The Chief Executive understood the points made but reiterated that the delay of the settlement and the pandemic had resulted in an approach that differed to previous years, both of which had impacted the Council's certainty and capacity.

The Leader of the Council added that since budget cuts had taken place over the past ten years services had been redesigned to work in a completely different way. It had been known that Harrow Council was a low funded council and that services had been paused because of the pandemic, this was due to the lack of capacity of staff who had to work priorities that revolved around the pandemic. In addition, Harrow Council were not in a position to cut services further and that a decision may need to be taken whether certain service continued.

**Q14. Regarding education, schools were approached to not take on some of their delegated monies when they were supposed to because there was an issue around budgeting in education. Was that the case?**

The Director of Finance noted that they were not aware of this and for this to be checked.

**Q15. Are there any problems with the proposed final funding formula for school funding for 2022/23 as it was believed that the school payroll service would no longer pay, therefore were there implications on the revenue after April?**

The Director of Finance explained that it would not because schools had opted out of the Council's payroll service therefore the schools had chosen not to pay for this service and would use a different provider. Their budgets should not be impacted and that the Council's provision for dealing with the service would be reduced due to the lowered income from this service.

**Q16. In terms of the capital budget, the impact on revenue on the capital budget was 18% and the following year went up to 20% and then 21%. This is servicing the debt, what had been done to address that to reduce**

**that impact? This was because that is quite a large proportion of the revenue budget going towards servicing the capital budget.**

The Director of Finance explained that the figures quoted were a mixture of the interest payments on the Council's borrowings and the minimum revenue provision, an amount which has to be set aside to repay debt. The Director of Finance agreed that it was a significant proportion but as a Council no borrowing had been done over a number of years for it to be ensured that the council had not added to the debt portfolio. Significant savings had been made over the pandemic as borrowing was avoided as much as possible and that debts were paid where possible.

**Q17. These are still capital financing costs, so this had this still been an impact on the revenue budget in order to finance that capital?**

The Director of Finance confirmed this but highlighted that they were made of interest paid on debt and that money had been set aside to go towards debt repayment, that money was used to fund the capital programme so that borrowing was avoided.

**Q18. Presumably the capital budget would be impacted by the business plans that were currently being drawn up for the HSDP and those business plans were due to come to Cabinet in February 2022 before the budget was passed and was due to be considered in March after the budget had been passed. What would the impact of that be on the assumptions within the capital budget?**

The Director of Finance explained that there had not been any impact on the capital budget because capital provision had been made for regeneration. It was added that that there was sufficient money within the capital programme for the business plans to be funded in 2022/23.

**Q19. It was referred to that there were £2m of savings no longer going ahead in this budget, was there a strategy for these savings to be achieved?**

The Director of Finance raised that the pandemic had negatively impacted on the councils ability to find these savings and struggled in terms of capacity for more robust plans to be made. Therefore, it was reversed out and had been planned to be put back into the budget when capacity allowed.

The Chief Executive added that these savings had first appeared in the 2020/21 budget and at the time it was reasonable to assume these savings were achievable and should be expected to be seen in the 2023/24 budget.

The Member added if it had been better for a plan to have been made prior to adding it to the budget. To which the Chief Executive noted that the Council had given 12 months for this savings to be planned but due to the Pandemic had not been possible.

**Q20. For the reserves to exist, would that mean that the council had £80m in the bank to be able to liquidate these reserves promptly or as required?**

The Director of Finance explained that the reserves were money that the Council had earmarked which totalled £64m at the end of Quarter 2 and that a substantial proportion were earmarked which could not be liquidated. For example, £8.9m within the collection fund reserve had to be paid back into the general fund. It was important for it to be noted that some reserves (earmarked reserves) could not be spent due to their specific purposes. If a reserve was used for an unintended purpose, this would create pressure on services that had expected these funds. The Director of Finance concluded by confirming that Harrow Council had enough money in the bank at this time for reserves to be covered.

At the end of the question session the Chair thanked the Chief Executive, Director of Finance, the Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Finance and Resources for their attendance and responses and for the work that they had done on the budget.

**RESOLVED:** That the reports and responses received on the Council budget during the Question-and-Answer session, be noted.

### **For Consideration**

#### **Background Documents:**

Agenda of Overview and Scrutiny Committee – 11 January 2022:

Reports on:

- Draft Revenue Budget 2022/23 and Medium Term Financial Strategy 2022/23 to 2024/25
- Draft Capital Programme 2022/23 to 2024/25
- Quarter 2 Revenue & Capital Budget Monitoring 2021/22

Supplemental Agenda of Overview and Scrutiny Committee – 11 January 2022

Presentation on: Council Strategic Overview January 2022

Minutes of Overview & Scrutiny Committee – 11 January 2022

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**Cabinet – 10 February 2022**

**Reference from the Overview and Scrutiny Committee – 8 February 2022**

**200. Borough Plan – Key Achievements and Future Intentions**

The Committee received the Borough Plan – Key Achievements and Future Intentions report, which set the council's progress to date against the Borough Plan 2020-2030.

In his opening statement, the Director of Strategy and Partnerships provided a brief update on the borough plan, outlining a number of key points:

- The Plan had been developed with partners, voluntary and community sector colleagues to set out aspirations for the borough for 2020-2030.
- It had been intended that a detailed delivery plan be provided, to support the Borough Plan. However, due to the Council's capacity and the upcoming Borough Elections in May 2022 it had been felt that the plan should set out the priorities of the Council and partnership, and that the more detailed delivery plan be developed with the incoming Administration in May.
- The plan covered a significant amount of achievement that the Council and Partnership had delivered over the previous years and set out intentions for the Council and Partnership against the eight priorities and the two cross cutting themes.

The Leader of the Council added that the past two years had been very challenging but was pleased with what had been achieved and this was reflected within the report. In addition, where there had been a lot of change in recent years, there was an opportunity for service delivery to be rebuilt. It was added that partnership working within Harrow and across west London had been enhanced because of the challenges. A number of key services had continued to be delivered during that time and though some services had to be paused they were to be resumed with new services being offered.

Members thanked the Director of Strategy and Partnerships and the Leader of the Council for their introductions. In the session which followed, questions around the borough plan were asked as set out below.

- The Chair asked if any of the priorities set out in the Borough Plan had changed since November 2020 and was advised that changes had not been made and that the set of priorities and cross cutting themes remained the same as those in the November 2020 version.

- A Member of the Committee stated that the report noted two risk implications that were graded as red in that the Borough Plan was not affordable and that there was a lack of strategic leadership capacity. The Member questioned how risks could be reduced.

The Director of Strategy and Partnerships explained that there was a need to be as transparent as possible in terms of the Council's own funding position. The long-term funding position of Local Government was still to be finalised by Government so the current planning horizon needed to assume savings being made, which in turn would mean that perhaps not all the ambitions may be realised with the Borough Plan. He added that it would not mean that the Borough Plan would be undeliverable but that choices would need to be made on what could be delivered.

The Director of Strategy and Partnerships noted that in terms of strategic leadership capacity a number of changes were planned across the senior leadership team in the Council; these positions would be filled following appropriate recruitment processes. However, this could present capacity challenges in the short term.

The Leader added that capacity continued to be an issue, but some things were above target.

- A Member indicated that whilst staff turnover could not be foreseen community safety remained a big issue and that a personal safety strategy should be a priority and built upon further. The Member sought clarification in terms of the timeframe for the Community Safety Strategy.

The Director of Strategy and Partnerships explained that the community safety strategy had been due to be presented to the February Full Council meeting. However, the pandemic and current capacity of the Council meant that the strategy would be delayed. This report would also set out the final Mayor's Police and Crime Plan and that the updated plan would set out a greater focus on public safety and would be developed with the next Administration.

The Member added that safety should be considered for everyone and that all protected characteristics should be encompassed within the safety strategy where the previous strategy could be surpassed. The Director of Strategy and Partnerships explained that these would be included in the aspirations of the strategy; however, funding would be a critical issue. The local engagement by the Police was a key part of this work as well. In addition, recent planned activity around women's safety included things like training for frontline staff across the different services.

The Leader of the Council noted that Harrow had been one of the safest boroughs and a lot of work had been done around Harrow's town centre, as highlighted in the Borough Plan. Main concerns raised from a recent consultation raised how a fear of crime was found within schools and positive work had been done to address this.

A Member of the Committee added that personal safety for everyone needed to be considered and that future policies that would be expanded upon and carried out would be welcomed.

- A Member of the Committee asked if the large number of priorities had been a help or hindrance to the borough plan, to which the Leader of the Council explained that with the high volume of services the Council provided it was felt that these eight priorities ensured that no one would be at risk of being left out and it would not be right to remove a priority, they also set an ambition and direction for the Council.

The Director of Strategy and Partnerships added that the priorities should not be considered individually as multiple priorities could be supported by major pieces of work, such as the Harrow Strategic Development Partnership.

- The Chair raised that the priorities within the report appeared broad and highlighted that there was a lack of depth as previous borough plans had included objectives. It was also noted that the current document did not address or measure progress against the objectives that had been set out in the November 2020 Borough Plan. The Director of Strategy and Partnerships recognised these limitations but noted that due to the capacity of the Council being stretched in order to keep core service delivery going and responding to the pandemic, as well as the Council approaching Borough Elections in May 2022, it was felt that the Borough Plan needed to set out the strategic direction of the Council and partnership.
- A Member of the Committee understood that many services were to be digitised but highlighted that not all residents had access to the internet or could use computers and relied on phones and letters. The Member sought clarification as to how these residents were being supported.

The Leader explained that a lot of work had been undertaken to move services online and how people could access services. For those who had found accessing services online difficult, alternative routes of support would be given and that this was working well. In addition, although staff had been working remotely, the ability to receive calls remained with the technology the Council had.

The Director of Strategy and Partnerships added that an approach should be digital by design as opposed to digital by default and that the design needed to recognise that some residents might either be unable or be in need of greater support to access digital service and that the Council would need to allow for this in its service design.

In addition, the Director of Strategy and Partnerships added that as two examples, the community hub, which was set up during the pandemic, made outbound calls to support those people Shielding within Harrow

during the pandemic; and the work at North Harrow Library which supported residents to improve their digital and IT skills.

- The Chair advised that some residents had reported difficulties reaching the Council via phone and that reporting via the website had not resulted in a response. The Chair questioned how these issues could be addressed. The Leader of the Council stated that the website had won national awards but acknowledged that issues might be found and could be reported, and that the website had been regularly improved.

The Director of Strategy and Partnerships recognised that there was always room for improvement for all Council services and with regards digital services, feedback was continually sought. It was recognised that to be fully digital would have its limitations and that there would always be a need to accommodate service accessibility in other ways.

- A Member of the Committee noted that only achievements were listed in the report and not challenges faced. The Director of Strategy and Partnerships explained that in the diagram where the eight prioritise were depicted, the top five priorities were where improvements could be made and bottom three were areas where performance had been good and needed to be maintained.
- A Member stated that benchmarks had not been noted in the Borough Plan and it was difficult for progress to be tracked and that it would have been useful for results to be noted so that costs could be justified.

The Director of Strategy and Partnerships explained that if the delivery plan accompanied the borough plan, more metrics would have been included and this would be developed with the new Administration. Some benchmarking had been undertaken with regard to the climate emergency, looking at carbon footprint and external expertise was being commissioned to support how this benchmarking work could be used to develop options for the Council to consider.

The Leader of The Council added that metrics and measurements to see if a project had been effective were important and that these would be part of the business cases which would include the appropriate data.

- A Member raised that further access to the outcomes of strategies would be welcomed. The Member indicated that they would welcome information on how the carbon footprint would be impacted by the new civic centre. The Director of Strategy and Partnership mentioned that one option could be that the climate emergency strategy and associated work could be incorporated into the Overview and Scrutiny Committee's work plan. In addition, it was noted that strategies such as the Economic development strategy included key performance indicators (KPIs) and did not necessarily need to sit within the Borough Plan and could be found in the sub strategies.

- The Chair asked how the achievements within the report had been verified, as it appeared the council leadership was marking its own homework. The Chair also raised concerns that the quarterly strategic performance reviews had not been undertaken or published for two years, which would have provided a more robust assessment of performance, and were important to assess the services and value for money provided to residents. The Director of Strategy and Partnerships advised that achievements would not be published if they could not be verified by supporting evidence. In addition, through the annual audit, there was an assurance process including the Annual Governance Statement that had been signed off externally which provided a level assurance. Further, quarterly performance reports had not been produced due to pressures from the pandemic, although the data continued to be collected and an abridged data set was used for a monthly report that had been provided to all Members. It was planned to re-introduce the quarterly performance reports with the new Administration.
- The Chair asked if there were any areas where the Council had not performed as well as it could have and where improvements could be made. The Director of Strategy and Partnerships noted that lessons had been learnt through the pandemic.
- A Member, who was not a member of the Committee, welcomed the report but raised concern that the safety of every community within all wards should be treated equally and suggested that some wards had more CCTV cameras than others. In addition, it was important for the delivery of projects to be transparent.

The Director of Strategy and Partnerships explained that CCTV was one aspect of the council's response to community safety and that not all wards have the same level or same types of crime and the Council had engaged with the police to support community safety.

The Leader of the Council explained that CCTV had been a tool to solve crime, not the sole solution, and was there to support the police and community. Some wards had used funds on mobile cameras to support communities.

- The Chair asked if the short-term delivery plan had arisen from the 2020 Borough Plan and was advised that the first wave of pandemic had impacted on the initial plan to develop a delivery plan and by the time the first lockdown had ended the Borough Plan was being refreshed to take account of the racial disproportionality cross cutting theme. There were then two further lockdowns and the planning for this current refresh had only started in the summer of 2021 at which time, given the stage of the political cycle and organisational capacity, that it had been decided that a delivery plan would come after the election.
- A Member, who was not a member of the Committee, expressed the view that it would be a good opportunity to reflect on how the pandemic

had been handled and for what could have been done differently. In addition, the Member praised the booking system for the recycling centre but noted that some residents had experienced issues accessing online services and that this should be addressed, in particular access to the recycling centre's booking system.

The Leader of the Council explained that the recycling centre's booking system had been introduced to reduce traffic flow in and around the area and that it had been effective in doing so. However, he added that a review of the system had taken place to find areas of improvement.

A Member asked if more than one slot could be booked at the recycling centre, to which the Leader explained that this restriction had been put in place so that unlicensed waste carriers could be better managed but mentioned that a system review was planned.

- A Member stated that the Council had responded well to the pandemic but sought clarification if a resilience team would be put in place to continue strategy and performance at times of crisis as the lack of performance reports had made it difficult for progress to be monitored. The Leader advised that system would be reviewed.

The Director of Strategy and Partnerships explained that in terms of the strategic resilience of the Council during the pandemic, the additionality had been due to all staff working longer hours, and during the first wave capacity was re-allocated to meet different priorities. There was no reserve capacity, although this would be welcomed if the funding position allowed. However, this stretch on the Council was unsustainable in the medium term and across Local Government in general further challenges on strategic capacity would exist in the short term as a significant number of senior staff were choosing to step down from their roles.

- A Member of the Committee raised concern over tooth decay in children and welcomed that it was made a priority within 'Work for Harrow'.

**RESOLVED:** That

1. the report be noted;
2. the comments in terms of how the Committee would want to be involved in the further development of the Borough Plan and for inclusion in the scrutiny work programme be considered noting that the Committee expressed that they would want to future versions of the Borough Plan included in their work programme.
3. That the comments from the Committee on the Borough Plan be referred to Cabinet.

## **For Consideration**

### **Background Documents:**

- Agenda of Overview and Scrutiny Committee – 8 February 2022:
- Supplemental Agenda of Overview and Scrutiny Committee – 11 January 2022

### **Reports on:**

- Borough Plan – Key Achievements and Future Intentions
- Minutes of Overview & Scrutiny Committee – 8 February 2022

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