# Minutes

**CORPORATE RESOURCES & INFRASTRUCTURE
SELECT COMMITTEE**

**17 September 2024**

**Meeting held at Committee Room 6 - Civic Centre,
High Street, Uxbridge UB8 1UW**

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| | **Committee Members Present**:<br>Councillors John Riley (Chair), Kaushik Banerjee, Farhad Choubedar, Stuart Mathers (Opposition Lead), Elizabeth Garelick, Narinder Garg and Philip Corthorne<br><br>**LBH Officers Present**:<br>Matthew Wallbridge, Chief Digital and Information Officer<br>Darren Persaud, Head of Digital<br>Ian Anderson, Business Manager<br>Anisha Teji, Senior Democratic Services Officer |
| 22. | **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**  *(Agenda Item 1)*<br><br>Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Adam Bennett with Councillor Philip Corthorne substituting. |
| 23. | **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST IN MATTERS COMING BEFORE THIS MEETING** *(Agenda Item 2)*<br><br>None. |
| 24. | **MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING**  *(Agenda Item 3)*<br><br>**RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting held on 23 July 2024 be confirmed as an accurate record.** |
| 25. | **TO CONFIRM THAT THE ITEMS OF BUSINESS MARKED AS PART I WILL BE CONSIDERED IN PUBLIC AND THAT THE ITEMS MARKED AS PART II WILL BE CONSIDERED IN PRIVATE**  *(Agenda Item 4)*<br><br>It was confirmed that all items would be heard in Part I. |
| 26. | **DRAFT HILLINGDON DIGITAL STRATEGY**  *(Agenda Item 5)*<br><br>The Chief Digital and Information Officer and Head of Digital introduced the report on the Draft Hillingdon Digital Strategy. The Council's Draft Digital Strategy (the Strategy) for the next three years was presented for input before being presented to Cabinet for final endorsement. Members heard that the Strategy aimed to make the Council more modern and efficient by prioritising customer needs and focusing on delivering services digitally to help residents and customers access Council services 24/7. The Council aimed to adopt an agile approach to delivery, a unified approach to delivering customer needs and emphasised the use of data to direct better decisions.  It was highlighted that the London Borough of Hillingdon (LBH) was one of the first local authorities to deploy an automated voice and web chat system. |

The Head of Digital explained the Strategy's five work streams which were aimed at improving services for residents. The first work stream emphasised on building services online to make it more user friendly for residents. The second work stream highlighted the importance of data for better decision-making, using data to diagnose issues before they occurred and improve service delivery. The third work stream involved modernising infrastructure and systems to enable self-service. The fourth work stream focused on building digital capability and inclusion, ensuring that online services were accessible to all residents while freeing up resources for the most vulnerable. The final work stream focussed on using technology to make improvements in the Borough and the way it functioned.

Members enquired whether there were varied focus groups in place to test systems prior to them being rolled out completely. It was explained that customers and residents were involved in designing services, including user testing to understand needs and tests of the website. Post rollout feedback would also be collated and the government digital services methodology would be followed.

The Committee acknowledged that there was a need for digital engagement however it needed to be fit for purpose.  Questions were raised regarding residents who may never be able to access services online and  how the proposed developments would work for people who preferred to use phones. The importance of digital inclusion was highlighted to Members and it was recognised that some people might not be able to interact online. Vulnerable customers were prioritised for support and there were already initiatives in place to support residents such as recycling devices and providing training to help residents build digital skills. The Council was committed to ensuring that both residents and staff had  the necessary digital skills to improve service delivery.

In terms of the proposed connectivity programmes, it was noted that the LBH had significantly improved its connectivity, although some areas still required work. Members heard about initiatives such as partnerships with the West London Alliance to deploy 5G technology and plans to keep up with future advancements like 6G and 7G.

In response to questions regarding  the timeline for integrating new services and its impact on full time employees, it was explained that LBH was the first council to use Amazon Web Services (AWS) for front-facing customer contact, which significantly reduced the budget by decreasing the number of people answering telephones. There were also plans to integrate more sophisticated technology, such as generative AI and web chat, to further enhance efficiency. The Council aimed to adopt tried and tested solutions to improve service offerings and generate savings while delivering a better customer experience.

The Committee noted the ambition of the Strategy but emphasised the need for balance and adjustment to meet resident needs. Some Members expressed concerns about the recent software decisions, such as the introduction of Goss which had not demonstrated expected agility. The importance of focusing on quality assurance as a key performance indicator was emphasised and the challenges with the AWS system where some queries required personal engagement rather than being resolved digitally were noted.

Some Members also raised concerns about the transition from Jigsaw to Locator for housing homeless prevention which had resulted in residents no longer being able to get real-time updates on their housing cases. It was considered that this often caused

digital exclusion and it was important to understand customer needs and experiences, particularly for those who had social needs or anxieties.

Officers acknowledged the feedback on key performance indicators and the balance between measurable and future targets. The importance of balancing personal touch with digital experiences and recognising different resident needs within the community was stressed to Members. The Council aimed to allocate resources efficiently focusing on personal experiences and joined-up services. The creation of a data platform to connect information and support residents and households more effectively was explained to the Committee. Members were assured that the Council was committed to continuously improving customer experience and learning from feedback. The Strategy aimed to improve people's lives through better digital provision and understanding residents' needs.

In terms of a timetable for key deliverables expected before 2027, it was noted that the Strategy reflected the Council's vision from 2024 to 2027. Key deliverables included reengineering the customer experience with a new website and web chat, implementing a data platform to improve decision-making using data from residents, a digital inclusion program to support vulnerable people and a rolling program to review and digitise Council services focusing on efficiency and productivity.

During Member questions it was noted that the website offered translation services in over 100 languages and there was provision in place to ensure accessibility to screen readers. Discussions also took place about how customer service calls and data collection could be improved to better integrate this into the Strategy.

Members enquired how the Strategy was going to change the culture within the Council to ensure that essential data and feedback from residents was accurately captured and used effectively. It explained that the Strategy aimed to accelerate the change in the Council's culture to be more customer-focused and understanding of residents' needs. It emphasised the importance of taking feedback and using it to improve services. The Strategy and officers acknowledged that this was a progressive journey and would take time to achieve. The key goal was to use data and feedback to support communities better, break down barriers within services and target services more effectively.

Whilst noting the concerns around the need to address key performance indicators with the focus on residents needs, the Committee welcomed the comprehensive report and draft strategy. It was agreed that an update report would be provided to the Committee on how the Strategy was progressing.

The Committee agreed the following comments:

*The Committee welcomes the advances and positive strides made in the digital strategy and at the same time recognising the need to make resident experience with the Council evermore effectively digital in addition to actively supporting those residents less able to access digital services.*

**RESOLVED: That the Committee:**

1. **acknowledged the Draft Digital Strategy and provided comments prior to its submission to Cabinet on 2 October 2024.**

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| | **2. requested that an update report be added to the work programme focussing on the Digital Strategy implementation progress.** |
| 27. | **ANNUAL COMPLAINT & SERVICE MONITORING REPORT FOR 1 APRIL 2023 TO 31 MARCH 2024** *(Agenda Item 6)* |

The Chief Digital and Information Officer and the Business Manager presented the Annual Complaints and Service Monitoring Report for 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024.

The report was presented annually to the Committee, detailing complaints information for the financial year. It covered the complaints process, recent changes and observed trends. It was reported that the aim was to use complaints data to improve services by comparing the number of complaints with other local authorities and using insights to enhance service delivery.

The report provided an overview of the complaints process and key statistics. The following key points were highlighted to the Committee:

- the number of informal complaints dropped from 5176 last year to 3729 this year, with significant reductions in anti-social behaviour issues.
- Stage 1 complaints decreased from 816 to 681, while Stage 2 complaints increased from 121 to 180, mainly concerning housing allocation.
- Ombudsman investigations rose from 46 to 65, but 40 of these were not pursued further, indicating initial assessments found no merit.
- The volume of Members' enquiries and service requests totalled 11,791, a significant increase from the previous year.
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The report emphasised on learning from lessons to make improvements, with changes being implemented as required by the Ombudsman.

Members discussed the increase of the digital experience and how this would impact the level of Members Enquiries as residents would be able to handle various issues themselves without local Ward Councillor support. It was recognised that adjustments needed to be made for vulnerable people who were unable to access the system digitally and the Council kept a reasonable adjustment log to record these adaptations.

In terms of the implementation of lessons learned and the timelines for delivery, it was explained that lessons learned were implemented immediately. Whether identified within the Council or by the Ombudsman, these lessons were shared with senior officers and noted within the service. Follow-ups on implementation were conducted to ensure that the appropriate actions were taken.

In response to questions around the effectiveness of the service request system that was intended to directly connect requests to service teams, it was confirmed that the system generally worked as intended. When a service request was submitted it went directly to the actual service. However, there were occasional misdirected requests that required manual intervention.

The significance of using data to improve services was noted during Member discussions. Officers emphasised the importance of using data from complaints and service requests to shape services. There was a focus on understanding data behind lower-stage complaints to address issues before they escalated and using AI for handling repetitive service request. The Committee was informed that the Council

aimed to publish more data to allow residents to find information independently, reducing the need for formal requests and enabling more efficient resource allocation.

Concerns were raised about the challenges in housing and the high number of complaints. In response to the handling of 40 investigations that were not pursued by the Ombudsman and the lessons learned from these cases, it was explained that when the Ombudsman received a complaint, they reviewed the information provided before deciding whether to investigate. In cases where the Ombudsman did not investigate, it was often due to policy issues. The importance of providing clear information on the Council's website to help residents understand the process and reduce the number of complaints was highlighted. The website needed to be updated on a regular basis to ensure that it had the most relevant accurate information.

The Committee asked whether there were service level agreements for stage 1,2 and 3 complaints, and the timescales taken to resolve these complaints. It was explained that both housing and the local government Ombudsman introduced complaint handling codes with specific requirements. For service requests and stage 1 complaints, the response time was10 working days, extendable by another 10 days in exceptional circumstances. Stage 2 complaints must be resolved within 20 working days, extendable by another 20 days if necessary. The adult social care complaints procedure required a response within 20 working days at stage 1, after which they go to the Ombudsman. The children's complaints process involved an independent investigator at stage 2, with a maximum timeframe of 65 working days, and a review panel at stage 3 with a 45 working day response time.

In terms of the balance in the policy about unreasonable and unreasonably persistent complaints, it was explained the policy change was minor, involving the approval stage of the restricted persons register. The unreasonable person's policy and the restricted persons register were linked, and when someone abused the process, a submission was made to the relevant Head of Service to put the person on the restricted persons register. Restrictions may include no email contact, only telephone calls or letters. The Head of Service considered the facts and, if the request complied with the policy, approved it. A letter was then sent to the individual, explaining the restrictions and the appeal process. Members heard that the policy was rigorous, and only approximately 25 to 30 people were on the restricted persons register out of 290,000 residents.

The importance of recognising and sharing compliments for officers who performed well, alongside handling complaints was significant in Members' view. It was noted that there had been over 200 compliments and were shared with the individual and their manager to ensure recognition. The Goss complaint system also allowed for compliments to be submitted online, which were then communicated to the relevant teams.

The Committee welcomed the comprehensive report and thanked officers for their attendance.

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

| 28. | **FORWARD PLAN**  *(Agenda Item 7)* |
| | **RESOLVED: That the Forward Plan be noted.** |

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| 29. | **WORK PROGRAMME**  *(Agenda Item 8)*<br><br>The Committee was informed that the budgets were being reviewed by the newly appointed Corporate Director of Finance, who would also be considering how future financial performance was reported to Members. For this reason, there was no item for any budget updates on the Committee's agenda.<br><br>**RESOLVED: That the update on the budget and the Work Programme be noted.** |
| | The meeting, which commenced at 7.00 pm, closed at 8.43 pm. |

These are the minutes of the above meeting.  For more information on any of the resolutions please contact Anisha Teji, Senior Democratic Services Officer on ateji@hillingdon.gov.uk or 01895 277655.  Circulation of these minutes is to Councillors, Officers, the Press and Members of the Public.