

Minutes

FINANCE AND CORPORATE SERVICES SELECT COMMITTEE

6 September 2022

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



	<p>Committee Members Present: Councillors John Riley (Chairman) Kaushik Banerjee Kishan Bhatt Narinder Garg Gursharan Mand Stuart Mathers (Opposition Lead) Philip Corthorne (In place of Richard Lewis)</p> <p>LBH Officers Present: Matthew Kelly, Head of Procurement Iain Watters, Head of Finance - Financial Planning, Capital, Treasury & Systems Ian Anderson, Business Manager, Complaints & Enquiries Team Marie Stokes, Finance Business Partner Neil Fraser, Democratic Services Officer</p>
18.	<p>APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (<i>Agenda Item 1</i>)</p> <p>Apologies were received from Councillor Lewis. Councillor Corthorne was present as substitute.</p>
19.	<p>DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST IN MATTERS COMING BEFORE THIS MEETING (<i>Agenda Item 2</i>)</p> <p>None.</p>
20.	<p>MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING (<i>Agenda Item 3</i>)</p> <p>RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting held on 13 July 2022 be approved as a correct record.</p>
21.	<p>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 (<i>Agenda Item 4</i>)</p> <p>It was confirmed that all agenda items would be considered in public.</p>
22.	<p>ANNUAL COMPLAINTS & SERVICE UPDATE REPORT (<i>Agenda Item 5</i>)</p> <p>Ian Anderson - Business Manager, Complaints & Enquiries Team, introduced a report detailing information and analysis of complaints and Members' Enquiries received between 1 April 2021 and 31 March 2022.</p>

The report was summarised, which showed that there was an overall increase in the number of informal complaints received, an increase in Stage 2 complaints, and an increase in investigations by the Ombudsman. The service areas that had received the most number of informal complaints were Housing, Waste and ASBET. The number of Stage 2 complaints had increased because the Council had made a conscious decision to give complainants the option to escalate to Stage 2 if they were dissatisfied with the Stage 1 response, rather than a direct escalation to the Ombudsman from Stage 1. The number of Ombudsman investigations had also increased, mainly because the Ombudsman paused their investigations for 4 months during 2020/21 and they had caught up in 2021/22. It was recognised that the Covid-19 pandemic had likely contributed to the increase, as more people had been at home to experience issues previously unrecognised when away at work.

Compliments had been seen to have decreased when compared to the previous year, though this was expected as the planting of borough-wide wildflowers had resulted in a disproportionately high number of compliments during 2020/21.

Member's Enquiries (ME's) were similar to the previous year, with the most common queries on the subject of Planning, Housing and Waste (particularly issues of fly-tipping). ME's on adult/children social care issues were comparatively fewer in number, but were more complex and demanding to resolve.

Response times were broadly positive, though in some areas could be better. However, Members were reminded that Hillingdon had set a much tighter deadline for responding to Stage 1 complaints than most other Local Authorities i.e. Hillingdon's target for responding to Stage 1 complaints was 10 working days, as opposed to 20 working days.

It was commented that residents would lodge complaints about the application of a policy, such as the Social Housing Allocation Policy, rather than the principle of the policy itself. These complaints tended to escalate to the Ombudsman.

Members sought further information on a number of points. Regarding the use of mediation and conciliation to de-escalate issues, the Committee was advised that mediation was available to residents but rarely progressed as all parties had to agree to mediation and usually one party would decline. It was agreed that the officer would look into whether staff in the Council had been trained as mediators and whether there was any potential for staff to receive mediation training. The importance of learning from errors and striking a conciliatory tone when responding to residents had been recognised. Data, as set out in the report, was presented to Corporate and Senior Managers to identify trends and issues to be overcome.

Customer satisfaction on the complaints process was difficult to gauge, with previous feedback exercises showing that ratings were often dependant on whether or not the outcome had been positive for the resident. Members suggested that officers review the potential for a pop-up feedback survey on the Council's website.

The new ME process was confirmed to provide a greater amount of real-time data, including a distinction between service requests and Members Enquiries.

Regarding ME's on fly-tipping, it was requested that the clerk forward the most recent report on Hillingdon's review of littering and fly-tipping to Cllr Mand. The Chairman

advised that the topic was also being reviewed within the LGA, with harsher penalties for offenders being considered.

On the matter of delays, it was confirmed that most complainants were responded to within 20 days. When delays did occur, the timeline was missed in most instances by 1-3 days. The Committee requested that further data, broken down by service area, be provided following the meeting.

It was requested that future reports include detail of Hillingdon's performance versus its statistical neighbours.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

23. **MID-YEAR BUDGET UPDATE REPORT** (*Agenda Item 6*)

Iain Watters – Director, Strategic and Finance Operations, and Marie Stokes – Finance Business Partner, introduced a report detailing budget planning work for services within the Committee's remit.

Officers highlighted the challenges that the Council was working to address, including the reduction in government funding, the continuing impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the significant inflationary pressures facing the nation. Examples of how the pandemic continued to affect Council revenues included the ongoing reduction in car park fees as a result of reduced footfall within town centres.

Inflation was recognised as a larger challenge that officers were seeking to address through the identification of opportunities for more effective use of resources. This included identifying efficiencies in procurement and supply chain management. Moving forward, the Council would be looking to central Government for additional funding to help further address such pressures.

The Committee sought additional information on a number of points. On the matter of how the Council was forecasting and planning for the ongoing impact of the pandemic or rising inflation, officers advised that the previous year's budget and forecast had included estimates on expected reduction in income due to the pandemic. Future budgets currently being worked on included a refinement of those estimates to address such legacy pressures. The new pressure of rising inflation was being addressed in partnership with external advisors. Borrowing rates from the Treasury were increasing, and officers were reviewing the Council's capital programme as a result. Where required, business cases for capital spend were being revised, though the need to continue with required developments, such as school expansions, was highlighted.

Regarding the report's suggestion that rising costs would be temporary, it was accepted that this could be optimistic. As a result, MTFE modelling now included forecasting for longer than the usual 2-year period. It was highlighted that the new Government administration would seek to address rising inflation, which would likely have an impact on any subsequent Council actions. On the matter of social care economy and potential budgetary headroom, this continued to be monitored by officers.

Reference was made to funding of the HRA/DSG. Officers advised that such matters were within the remit of other Select Committees, though would note the subject for potential inclusion in future reports.

	RESOLVED: That the report be noted.
24.	<p>SCOPING REPORT FOR PROPOSED REVIEW OF PROCUREMENT WITHIN HILLINGDON COUNCIL (<i>Agenda Item 7</i>)</p> <p>Consideration was given to the scoping report for the proposed review of Procurement within Hillingdon. The Committee was supported by Matthew Kelly – Head of Procurement and Commissioning.</p> <p>The Committee enthusiastically endorsed the proposed review subject and highlighted its timeliness in light of the budgetary pressures facing the Council, such as legacy effects of the pandemic and significantly rising inflation.</p> <p>Regarding the topics to consider as part of the review, the following suggestions were made:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How to increase the participation of local businesses within the procurement and tendering process; • An assessment of the criteria for the successful award of contracts, to ensure their achievability for SMEs; • A review of contracts post-tender, e.g. to include force majeure clauses, or to ensure quality control and accountability; • The impact of Brexit and other regulatory changes; • How procurement was effectively promoting social and environmental responsibilities; • A review of sub-contracts to ensure quality control and best practices; • Effective witness sessions with key partners such as the local Chamber of Commerce. <p>It was requested that the clerk, in consultation with the Chairman and relevant officers, refine the proposed information gathering sessions in light of the suggestions above.</p> <p>RESOLVED:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. That the Finance and Corporate Services Select Committee proceed with a review of Procurement within Hillingdon; 2. That the clerk, in consultation with the Chairman and relevant officers, refine the proposed information gathering sessions to incorporate feedback from the Committee.
25.	<p>CABINET FORWARD PLAN (<i>Agenda Item 8</i>)</p> <p>Consideration was given to the Cabinet Forward Plan and it was:</p> <p>RESOLVED: That the Cabinet Forward Plan be noted.</p>
26.	<p>WORK PROGRAMME (<i>Agenda Item 9</i>)</p> <p>Consideration was given to the Committee’s Work Programme.</p> <p>In response to a query, the Committee was advised that the previously suggested item on electoral services had been confirmed as not within the Committee’s remit, with such matters reserved for Full Council.</p>

	RESOLVED: That the Work Programme be noted.
	The meeting, which commenced at 7.00 pm, closed at 8.27 pm.

These are the minutes of the above meeting. For more information on any of the resolutions please contact Neil Fraser on . Circulation of these minutes is to Councillors, Officers, the Press and Members of the Public.