

Minutes

FINANCE AND CORPORATE SERVICES SELECT COMMITTEE

11 January 2024



Meeting held at Committee Room 5 - Civic Centre

	<p>Committee Members Present: Councillors John Riley (Chair), Wayne Bridges (Vice-Chair), Kaushik Banerjee, Kishan Bhatt, Narinder Garg, Raju Sansarpuri and Stuart Mathers (Opposition Lead)</p> <p>LBH Officers Present: Andy Goodwin – Head of Strategic Finance Marion Finney – Community Engagement Manager Marie Stokes – Head of Counter Fraud and Finance Anisha Teji – Senior Democratic Services Officer</p>
49.	<p>APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (<i>Agenda Item 1</i>)</p> <p>There were no apologies for absence.</p>
50.	<p>DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST IN MATTERS COMING BEFORE THIS MEETING (<i>Agenda Item 2</i>)</p> <p>There were no declarations of interest.</p>
51.	<p>MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING (<i>Agenda Item 3</i>)</p> <p>RESOLVED: That the minutes from the meeting on 22 November 2023 be agreed.</p>
52.	<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 items would be heard in Part I.</p>
53.	<p>CABINET'S BUDGET PROPOSALS FOR NEXT FINANCIAL YEAR (<i>Agenda Item 5</i>)</p> <p>The Head of Strategic Finance and Head of Finance – Counter Fraud and Finance introduced the report detailing the draft revenue budget and capital programme for the services within the remit the Committee.</p> <p>Key points from the report were highlighted, including details of the financial pressures generated by the ongoing inflation, growing demand for services and a lack of certainty over Government funding beyond 2024/25, with the budget taking a prudent approach to support financial resilience over the medium term. It was reported that the balanced budget was set to be achieved through a combination of efficiency savings and increases in Council Tax and Fees and Charges.</p> <p>Budget proposals for 2024/5 had been prepared in the context of a wider strategy</p>

addressing the five-year MTFE period. The latest monitoring position for the 2023/24 financial year reported a net underspend of £2k which would leave uncommitted General Balances at £26,848k entering the 2024/25 financial year.

The Committee noted that Cabinet would consider the budget proposals on 15 February 2024 and the report would include comments from Select Committees. Members were informed that Council would meet to agree the 2024/25 budgets and Council tax levels on 22 February 2024.

The Chairman acknowledged that this was a good news budget in incredibly tough times and circumstances.

In response to questions around efficiency savings, collaboration, and shared funding projects with other local authorities, it was explained that the budget gap was identified to consider the value of savings required. This was followed by MTFE strategy workshops where corporate directors were invited to present their proposals and wide-reaching discussions were undertaken. Benchmarking data from other local authorities was considered and at present Grant Thornton was helping to review the budget. Grant Thornton was very knowledgeable and experienced with working local authorities.

The Committee was informed that the Council was very resident driven and service delivery was prioritised. Factors such as inflation and the knock-on effects of wars had impacted the budget and wider service impacts.

Some Members raised concerns about the lack flexibility in the budget and, without investment from the government, questions were raised around sustainability. Concerns were raised around the level of reserves available, Council programs potentially not being delivered, the amount of savings to be made, the manage vacancy approach and the wellbeing of staffing teams that were already under resourced. It was noted that the general reserves were the third lowest in London and the Council was using a substantial proportion of its earmarked reserves. The benefits of transformation were acknowledged but questions were raised about whether the current projects aligned with resident needs. The Cabinet was called to consider ways to build more resilience into the budget taking into account the financial challenges faced by the Council.

Some Members enquired how transformation would be funded if assets were not sold. The closure of childrens centres, nurseries and relocating libraries to release assets was questionable when these services were required by the Community.

Clarification was sought in respect of the Hillingdon first card savings and it was noted that this had been factored into the savings program and was process focussed. It was also clarified that if transformation was not funded by capital assets it would be released from revenue expenditure. It was confirmed that the older people initiative in the capital programme was not related to the older people discount.

It was explained that six million of ear marked reserves were being used and five million of that was budget for. The approach was to have a low level of reserves with a low-level budget strategy to mitigate having those lower risks and there were underspends showing prudence. Contract inflation expenditure was also another prudent area of the budget. Assets were being sold that were in surplus requirement or that were deemed no longer suitable for the services that were being delivered.

It was noted that producing a balanced budget was difficult in the current circumstances. The budget aimed to deliver services in a more efficient way.

Officers were thanked for preparing the budget and for the continued monitoring of service areas. The Committee considered this to be a comprehensive report and easily digestible set of papers.

The following comments were proposed as the Committee's comments.

'The Committee welcome the Budget as published and consulted on set out in the Cabinet papers of the 14th December 2023, the Council's Budget.

We acknowledge the substantial and significant pressures and complexities that are usually involved in a Council setting a balanced Budget across the myriad of disciplines, statutory obligations and service intentions that a council may wish to budget for.

This process has been made even more challenging and complex due to the combined effects of inflationary and interest rate pressures contributing to the harsh economic realities for everyone concerned, in working with or being provided for, by the Council. Service provision of every type has been affected by the economic circumstances that the London Borough of Hillingdon has to "live with and in". Add to this the way in which Local Authorities are financed, with the seemingly haphazard and timely unhelpful funding formulas makes budget setting and provision a complexity of extraordinary proportions.

In this regard, we commend the work of the Cabinet Member for Finance, in particular, together with the Leader of the Council and Cabinet and of course the Finance Officer Team for their excellent work in achieving a balanced budget for this time period. Many other Local Authorities with the same pressures are failing and will fail to achieve what the whole finance team have done in Hillingdon.

We are particularly keen to endorse the proposals for savings, within our Committee remit, while continuing to promote and maintain all services in whatever way can be done so. The clear intention to drive efficiency in service provision without a reduction in service is welcome and necessary. Where necessary some services will need re-balancing or realigning and refreshing to meet the current circumstances.

That is only to be expected when applying efficiency standards, prudence in approach and financial rectitude. Strong financial management of the Hillingdon budget is the absolute route to budgetary success.

We acknowledge the budget proposals for the committee service areas, the need to update, in as resident focused was as possible, the overall picture regarding fees and charges and council tax is a significant challenge given the economic issues as they have developed in recent years contrasting with the past.

Proposals for digitalisation, commercialisation, better use of services and delivery are all budgetary proposals that are welcome and which we as a committee will closely scrutinise to aid the process. We will be keen to engage

with reviews around commercialisation in appropriate areas and of services eg Legal services, corporate services and others in our remit.

This budget is a significant achievement which is to be commended.'

A motion was made to submit the comments stated above, and when put to a vote there were four in favour and three against.

RESOLVED: That the Committee:

- 1. noted the budget projections contained in the report.**
- 2. Submitted the above statement to Cabinet.**

54. **REVIEW OF THE COUNCIL'S CONSULTATION ARRANGEMENTS** (*Agenda Item 6*)

The Committee agreed to hold a single meeting review to hear further information about the Council's Consultation Arrangements. It heard a detailed presentation from the Community Engagement Manager.

The Terms of Reference for the review were:

1. To investigate the Council's Consultation Arrangements as requested by motion in (initial discussion at Select Committee in October).
2. To review how the voice of our diverse communities are heard working together towards geographical parity.
3. To make any necessary recommendations to Cabinet based on the Committee's findings.

The Committee heard about the Council's Customer Engagement website which was a page on the Council's Sharepoint accessible by all employees. This page was an information hub on how to undertake consultations, different consultation methods, who to contact for support and the general process for the Council's consultation and surveys.

The different types of consultation and engagement methods included:

- ❖ Face to face meetings
- ❖ Virtual meetings / discussions
- ❖ Surveys (online and paper-based, telephone / postal methods)
- ❖ Hybrid sessions
- ❖ Information shared on noticeboards
- ❖ Social media comments / feedback
- ❖ Estate-based events
- ❖ Engagement with community and faith leaders
- ❖ Engagement with residents' associations, tenant groups etc.
- ❖ Assemblies (e.g. older people)
- ❖ Forums (e.g., carers, young people etc.)

The Committee was informed that a form was available for employees to complete which was then reviewed by a member of the Engagement team to review ensuring it was fit for purpose. The form asked for information such as proposed timings, whether it was a statutory consultation and whether it was a statutory consultation. The final consultation was then shared with the WebPage team for comment before making it

available for residents. The consultations were promoted by the Corporate Communications team through different channels such as social media, Hillingdon People magazine and internal communications. Once the consultation was live weekly downloads of response were sent to the relevant team to track progress.

Good engagement needed to be meaningful, timely, a fair representation and honest to provide an overall positive response. Hearing, physical and learning disability factors all needed to be considered when devising consultations.

Members were told that there was a real focus to reach those hard to reach or hidden communities as part of consultations to gain a fair representation. Consultations were tailored and adapted on relevant topics as some may be better through face to face/ virtual hearings, surveys, hybrid sessions, engagement with Community Leaders and resident associations.

An overview of 18 + census data which provided insight into ethnicity, religion, disability and age was provided to the Committee. Key statistics were highlighted through the demonstration of various charts and graphs. It was noted that 18 plus residents were more likely to complete surveys and engage with the Council.

Members were provided with an analysis of consultations comparisons over the space of three years. Three examples were given in library services, budget and ULEZ consultations. These results had been analysed and a common trend was that there had been more consultations over the years which demonstrated the positive effects of the different methods used. It was clear that responses to consultations were dependent on peoples interests at the time. An example was given of the libraries consultation where a majority of people that responded were female and 65+ plus as they were the main service users.

A data comparison was provided from Harrow and Brent as these boroughs had a similar population to Hillingdon.

Areas of recommendation and ideas for the future included widening the provision for hard-to-reach communities, incentives where it was deemed fit, increase in partnership working, increase in engagement budget, increases in youth engagement, engagement with councillors and sharing engagement activity across services.

The Committee heard that the Community Engagement Manager attended a meeting with partners and different services to discuss strategies for driving engagement and participation among young people. The idea of organising a youth assembly, similar to assemblies for disability and older people was proposed. Working closely with Councillors to improve resident engagement and sharing knowledge was also key.

During Member discussions, it was noted that there was a great deal of work that was put into community engagement and officers were commended. Members welcomed the initiatives of speaking to people after they had completed surveys and engaged with services.

It was noted that the spirit behind the motion to Council was in relation to specific postcodes that were engaged throughout surveys and how this engagement could be improved across the Borough. Although surveys were completed based on interest,

there was a keen focus to ensure that the Borough's voice be heard overall. It was agreed that Councillors and officers would need to go beyond the normal of accepting that certain areas engaged and do more to see how all residents were impacted.

Observations made to improve engagement included the length of surveys to make them more appealing reducing them to a few short questions lasting less than a minute. More work could be done on social media to raise awareness such as following up comments left by residents on the Council's Facebook page. Working closing with Councillors and Youth Council to increase engagement in hard-to-reach communities. Members welcomed the use of pop up auto boxes after using services to get feedback and follow up text message services.

It was noted that there had been real success in the older peoples' assemblies where there were a significant number of people across the Borough with different demographics. Other ideas to improve engagement included road shows as these had worked well particularly for the NHS.

When consultation information was shared in Hillingdon people customer engagement numbers were also provided so that residents could contact the Council and request documents. There were a number of language translations available and this also sometimes prompted further engagements with residents. There was ongoing work with the Youth Council to increase their involvement in consultations. The Communications team was responsible for the Council's website and engagements.

A suggestion was made to improve the 'my Hillingdon account' as there were already a number of users and having a live consultation tab would be useful.

Overall, the importance of teamwork and collaboration for successful community engagement within the Council was emphasised.

The Committee thanked officers for their attendance and agreed to send any recommendations to Democratic Services.

RESOLVED:

That the Finance and Corporate Services Select Committee:

- 1. noted the evidence heard at the witness session.**
- 2. agreed to send any potential recommendations to Democratic Services.**

55. **CABINET FORWARD PLAN** (*Agenda Item 7*)

56. **WORK PROGRAMME** (*Agenda Item 8*)

RESOLVED: That the updates and work programme be noted.

The meeting, which commenced at 7.00 pm, closed at 8.35 pm.

These are the minutes of the above meeting. For more information on any of the resolutions please contact Anisha Teji on 01895 277655 or ateji@hillingdon.gov.uk.

Circulation of these minutes is to Councillors, Officers, the Press and Members of the Public.