

**MINUTES OF A SPECIAL MEETING OF THE
OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEES
Havering Town Hall, Romford
Thursday 28 July 2011 (7.30pm – 10.50pm)**

Present:

Children & Learning Overview and Scrutiny Committee –

Councillors Sandra Binion (chairman), Clarence Barrett (substituting for Gillian Ford – vice-chairman), Dennis Bull, Robby Misir, Linda Trew, Billy Taylor, Frederick Thompson, Nic Dodin and Pat Murray.

Co-opted Member present (non-voting) – Margaret Cameron

Crime & Disorder Committee –

Councillors Ted Eden (chairman)*, John Wood (vice-chairman), Rebecca Bennett, Roger Evans, Frederick Osborne, Linda Van den Hende*, Keith Darvill (substituting for Denis Breading) and Jeff Tucker* (substituting for David Durant).

Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee –

Councillors Jeff Brace (chairman), John Mylod (vice-chairman)*, Dennis Bull, Peter Gardner, Robby Misir (substituting for Garry Pain) Barbara Matthews* and Jeff Tucker (substituting for David Durant).

Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee –

Councillors Pam Light (chairman)*, Clarence Barrett (substituting for Brian Eagling – vice-chairman), Wendy Brice-Thompson, Fred Osborne, Linda Trew and Nic Dodin.

Individuals Overview and Scrutiny Committee –

Wendy Brice-Thompson (chairman), Linda Van den Hende (vice-chairman)*, Jeff Brace, Pam Light*, Keith Wells and Clarence Barrett (substituting for June Alexander).

Towns and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee –

Fred Osborne (chairman), Linda Hawthorn (vice-chairman)*, Wendy Brice-Thompson, Osman Dervish, Robby Misir (substituting for Garry Pain) Keith Wells, Ray Morgon, Paul McGeary and Michael Deon Burton.

Value Overview and Scrutiny Committee –

Robby Misir (chairman), Ray Morgon (vice-chairman), Ted Eden*, Billy Taylor, Damian White and Clarence Barrett (substituting for Ron Ower).

Members of the Cabinet

Councillors Michael White (Leader of the Council), Lesley Kelly*, Steven Kelly, Roger Ramsey and Paul Rochford* were present.

Other Members

Councillor Denis O'Flynn

* - for part of meeting

Apologies were received for the absence of Councillors June Alexander, Denis Breeding, David Durant, Brian Eagling, Gillian Ford, Georgina Galpin and Ron Ower.

There were no declarations of interest.

1. CHAIRMAN OF MEETING

With the agreement of all Overview & Scrutiny Committee Members, the Chair was taken at this special joint meeting by Councillor Sandra Binion.

The Chairman advised all present of action to be taken in the event of emergency evacuation of the Town Hall becoming necessary.

2. THE COUNCIL'S FINANCIAL STRATEGY

The Leader of the Council, Councillor Michael White explained that the Council's financial strategy had sensible financial planning as its bedrock. Investment had continued and could be seen in initiatives such as the My Place youth centre in Harold Hill and the recently announced new leisure facilities in Romford. There remained however an overall funding gap of £40 million and this report brought forward a series of balanced and focussed measures to meet the remainder of this deficit.

Services valued most by residents by residents would be protected under the proposals and there were be no closures of libraries or parks (indeed Havering's parks has recently won eight green flag awards) nor would there be any change to refuse collection. Children and the most vulnerable adults would continue to be supported.

Particularly in social care, investment would be made in preventative measures in order to realise savings in future years. Falls prevention would receive additional funds and technology used to allow people to live longer in their own homes. Work would also be started with families at an earlier stage.

The report set out recommendations to make the £16 million savings required to balance the Council's books. Councillor White added that the report provided reassurance to residents that the Council would continue to act in their best interests and deliver a sustainable level of Council Tax. Councillor White was confident the savings would be delivered but a contingency had also been established, should it be needed.

Councillor White had recently met, in conjunction with Conservative Council Leaders in North East London, the Local Government Minister, Bob Neill MP. Funding for local government would be changing to a business growth model and, in future, Business Rates would pay for up to 70-80% of Council services. Councillor White had explained that grant levels per head were key and that residents in some local roads received very different grant levels depending on which side of the road they lived. The Minister had indicated he was open to a separate funding deal for London, if this could be agreed by all boroughs.

Councillor White emphasised that the proposals sought to protect front-line services. He thanked officers and Cabinet Members for their professionalism during the process and was particularly grateful to Councillor Ramsey, the Chief Executive and the Group Director – Finance & Commerce for their assistance.

General Questions

Councillor Barrett felt there was insufficient detail of the savings given in the report but thanked officers for the further information they had supplied to him. He asked that, in future such reports include more detailed information as this would benefit the public.

The Leader clarified that the figures did not assume an annual Council Tax rise of 2.5%. Raising Council Tax was one option but other ways to make savings would also be considered. The change from a grant-based to a business rate-based system might also help the Council's finances but nothing could be ruled out at this stage.

Councillor Tucker asked if the Government Minister had given any advice on what areas the Council could invest in. Councillor White replied that he had not as this was not the Minister's role. The new model of funding would mean it was important to attract more businesses to Havering as this would increase the level of Business Rates collected and hence give more funds to be spent on services. The Council was in any case investing in projects such as the new swimming pool and new libraries in Rainham and Elm Park.

Councillor Barrett felt that monitoring of the budget savings was very important and asked if this could be done via exception reports brought to the overview and scrutiny committees. Councillor White was however seeking to reduce the cost of committee meetings. It was also part of Councillor Ramsey's role as Cabinet Member for value to ensure close monitoring of the savings. Councillor Ramsey added that monitoring of budgets was very important and that overview and scrutiny committees were welcome to look at the budget if they wished. The budget was considered robust enough for a two-year settlement and a new funding system would be in place after this.

Councillor Darvill asked if each Overview & Scrutiny Committee could look at the proposals but Councillor White pointed out that it was for each Committee to determine its own work programme, including investigations such as that suggested. Staffing implications of some proposals would however mean they could not be discussed in a public forum.

Councillor O'Flynn asked if there was a total saving of £16 million or £19 million as both figures were mentioned in the report. Councillor White confirmed that £4 million was not covered in the papers and there were various options to make this up including Business Rates and technical budget adjustments.

Questions raised and answers given relating to the specific savings proposals are shown in the appendix to the minutes.

Two propositions relating to items in the schedule of Savings Proposals were put to the vote. The details of those votes are set out in the appendix.

During the course of discussions, the Members of all Overview & Scrutiny Committees agreed to suspend Committee Procedure Rule 8(b) in order to complete the agenda of the meeting.

The Committees noted:

- 1. The financial position of the Council.**
- 2. That the report was formally consulting them on the Corporate budget adjustments and that this was the opportunity to scrutinise the Cabinet's decisions.**