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MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY BOARD Havering Town Hall, Main Road, Romford 16 April 2025 (7.00 - 9.40 pm)

Present:

COUNCILLORS

Conservative Group	Dilip Patel, Keith Prince and David Taylor
Havering Residents' Group	Laurance Garrard (Chairman), David Godwin, Christine Smith, Bryan Vincent and Julie Wilkes (Vice-Chair)
Labour Group	Jane Keane and Matthew Stanton
East Havering Residents' Group	Martin Goode
Residents' Association	Philip Ruck
Independent Group	

The Chairman reminded Members of the action to be taken in an emergency.

30 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND ANNOUNCEMENT OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

Apologies were received from Councillors Mandy Anderson (Jane Keane substituting) and Philippa Crowder (Christine Smith substituting).

31 DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS

5. HAVERING VOLUNTEER CENTRE.

Councillor Christine Smith, Personal, Former volunteer with Havering Volunteer Centre.

5. HAVERING VOLUNTEER CENTRE.

Councillor Jane Keane, Personal, Trustee of beneficiary of volunteers from Havering Volunteer Centre - Havering Museum.

32 MINUTES

The minutes of the meetings held on 29 January 2025 and 13 February 2025 were before the Committee for approval.

It was noted that apologies on 29 January were received from Councillor Dilip Patel rather than Councillor Nisha Patel.

A misspelling in the name of Councillor Jane Keane in the minutes of 13 February was also noted.

Other than the items above, the minutes were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

33 HAVERING VOLUNTEER CENTRE

The Head of Communities explained that no other organisation in the borough covered the work of the Havering Volunteer Centre (HVC). Many volunteers at the Wennington fires had been from the HVC and the current £56k Council funding was a relatively small amount. It was important that Havering had a sufficient number of volunteers.

The Chief Executive Officer of the HVC felt that the organisation did represent value for money. The HVC was careful with its resources and in 2024/25 had in excess of 7,000 volunteers on its books. A food bank was also operated. The volunteer hours supplied also constituted a cost saving to the borough. The volunteers supplied at the new St George's Medical Hub in Hornchurch had been recognised as a UK flagship model of volunteering.

The provision of the existing Havering grant also helped the HVC to attract further external funding. The HVC's current reserves were £86k with income of £160k and expenditure of £179k. The shortfall was being covered by reserves.

Should the Council funding end, HVC officers felt that its services would likely have to cease, putting pressure on other services. There would also be a loss of community cohesion. The proposed Council Giving Scheme would also be unlikely to succeed without support from the HVC.

The HVC was the only such organisation in Havering and only the HVC was able to produce this standard and capacity of volunteering.

It was clarified that the HVC did not have a lease on its premises, operating instead under a tenancy at will. The level of rent was approximately £12k per year. A Member felt that HVC should be given a longer lease on its premises.

There had not been any approach from the Council for HVC to assess social value in planning applications although HVC officers were keen to explore this in more detail.

Officers explained that the most vulnerable in the community – the elderly and the young would be affected if HVC reduced its services. Some people volunteered in order to boost their health and wellbeing and around 500 people had entered employment as a direct result of volunteering. If the Council grant was to be withdrawn, there was a possibility that the HVC could be wound up within six months.

Members felt that further information should be provided on the level of rent that HVC would be charged and whether this was likely to increase. Officers added that the rent charged by the Council had not increased since 2015 and the Head of Property Services was looking at alternative properties for the HVC.

A Member felt that the work the HVC had undertaken during the pandemic had been vital and that resources should not be taken away from the organisation. The HVC did a lot of outreach work in the community and recruited many skilled volunteers at job fairs etc. This could not take place if Council funding was withdrawn. If further funding was available, more people or organisations could be reached and health inequalities could also be addressed.

The current HVC location generated a lot of footfall and the premises also allowed the Carers Hub, Age UK and a Ukraine refugees group to operate in the borough. These tenants generated around £20k in room hire charges but the premises outgoings exceeded this at around £28.5k. The HVC would prefer a longer grant funding arrangement which would give more security to its operation. It was noted that the overall local government finance settlement was itself only for one year.

The HVC did receive some NHS funding for its volunteers at the St George's Health Hub. Match funding had also been used in the past. It was clarified that the HVC was registered for gift aid but that donations received were not of the type that qualified for gift aid.

The proposed rent increase was in line with market levels but a Member felt that a discount on this should be given to the HVC. Council funding for the HVC had previously come from underspends in other areas but officers felt this would be more difficult to achieve this year. Members recorded their thanks to the Council's Head of Communities for ensuring continuity of funding to the HVC. Members therefore felt that any underspend in other community engagement areas should be given to the HVC.

A Member was disappointed that funding had been released to Havering Citizens Advice without the information the Board had requested from the organisation having been supplied. Officers clarified that the HVC was not sub-letting its premises but allowing some of its rooms to be used by other charities. The HVC offered a referral rather than signposting service.

Members thought there should be more clarity from the Cabinet regarding where the HVC sat within the Council's voluntary sector strategy. HVC officers felt that the continuing of funding from the Council showed commitment and would encourage further funding from other organisations. It was also suggested that the Council should champion the role of the HVC and use its connections with local businesses to contribute to voluntary sector funding.

It was clarified that the HVC had not been informed of the rent level for their proposed alternative premises and had not yet seen inside the site. There would be costs associated with the move and the HVC did not have any funding for this. Some Members questioned whether the HVC needed a High Street location.

Members felt full details of any alternative site and the associated costs should be provided to the HVC as soon as possible. Members also expressed disappointment that the Cabinet Member was not present at the meeting and felt that Cabinet Members should be present at future scrutiny meetings. Cabinet should also commit to continuing its funding for the HVC and make clear its vision for volunteering in Havering.

HVC were happy to explore the potential donation of land for their premises by large developers as part of social responsibilities. The HVC did already engage with local businesses for the recruitment of volunteers. The presence of the other organisations such as Age UK and the Carers Hub on the same site did allow synergies and more effective engagement of volunteers. The uncertainty over funding meant the HVC could only offer one year contracts to staff, making recruitment difficult.

Around 20 walk-ins were received by the HVC each week looking for volunteering opportunities. People also called in to engage with the other services on the site.

The HVC had originally been given four weeks to pay an increased level of rent or leave the premises. Members felt that the treatment of the HVC during this period had been unacceptable but noted that the position had now been addressed. The Board felt that any rent charged to HVC be at less than market levels. It was also felt that, if possible, funding should be confirmed to the HVC over a longer time period. It was accepted however that this would require a longer term settlement for the Council from Central Government. The Council could also investigate alternative funding methods such as use of Neighbourhood Levies or the Community Infrastructure Levies. The introduction of a Neighbourhood Plan for Romford could facilitate support to the overall voluntary sector.

The Board agreed that the HVC offered value for money and that there were not any alternative organisations that could undertake the HVC's role.

The Overview and Scrutiny Board **AGREED** the following recommendations:

- 1. That the HVC be given a longer term lease on their current location.**
- 2. The Council should not ask the HVC to leave their current premises for a period of at least 18 months.**
- 3. Whilst noting the remedial action taken by senior officers, the Board condemns as unacceptable the previous poor treatment**

and language used by some Council officers when communicating with HVC staff.

4. Further detail should be given on the specific level of the rent increase to be applied. This should be at a lower level than current market rents.
5. Details of the proposed alternative site for the HVC that has been identified by the Council, including levels of associated costs, should be supplied to the HVC as a matter of urgency. The Board finds it unacceptable that the HVC should have been given four weeks notice to leave without a costed alternative being provided. The Board notes that this position has now been addressed.
6. The possibility of a charitable donation of premises to HVC should be explored.
7. Any underspend in the community engagement budget should be passed to the HVC.
8. Cabinet should make clear its vision for volunteering/the voluntary sector in Havering and where the HVC sits within this.
9. The Council should make proactive efforts to obtain increased funding and support for the voluntary sector from local businesses and partner organisations.
10. Cabinet should commit to continue current funding (as a minimum) for the HVC.
11. Information should be provided as to whether any other tenancies of voluntary organisations are at risk due to the position with the HVC premises.
12. If Council funding arrangements allow, certainty of funding for the HVC should be given for a period of at least three years.
13. The Council should explore the introduction of a neighbourhood plan for Romford as this would allow a Neighbourhood Community Infrastructure Levy to fund the HVC.
14. Cabinet is asked to support the view of the Board that the HVC provides good value for money.

34 **REVIEW OF BOARD'S WORK AND CONSIDERATION OF WORK PROGRAMME**

The Statutory Scrutiny Officer asked the Board to look back at its performance over the previous year and begin to consider its work programme for the coming year. Good scrutiny from elsewhere could be identified from the recent survey undertaken by the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny. Key issues for scrutiny to address had been identified as resource constraints, level of community engagement and the difficulty of measuring the impact of scrutiny. Recommendations for improving the effectiveness of scrutiny could include holding meetings away from the Town Hall and seeking to ensure increased levels of attendance and participation from the public. It was suggested that a young people's scrutiny session could take place, perhaps meeting in a school during the day.

Responses from the Cabinet to scrutiny recommendations could be reported to scrutiny at a future meeting. It was felt important that Cabinet Members should attend scrutiny meetings if scrutiny was to be effective. Members also that the scrutiny work plans and associated scopes should be set as early as possible.

Feedback was needed from Cabinet on what scrutiny recommendations would be taken forward. Members felt it would also assist if the Board or OSSC Chair and Vice-Chair could present scrutiny recommendations at scrutiny meetings. Cabinet responses to call-in comments should also be circulated to all members of the Board and other signatories.

Discussions on improving the scrutiny process had taken place between the Statutory Scrutiny Officer and the Chair of the Board with for example pre-meets being introduced as a result of these discussions. Members felt it would assist if reports could reach them say, two weeks before a meeting in order that papers could be reviewed in more detail.

The Board **AGREED** the following recommendations for response by Cabinet:

1. **The relevant Cabinet Member should be required to attend each meeting of the Board or Sub-Committees where there is an item relevant to their portfolios.**
2. **All Cabinet responses to scrutiny recommendations or comments should be included as an agenda item at the next scrutiny meeting.**
3. **Comments and recommendations to Cabinet should be presented at the Cabinet meeting by the Chairman and Vice-Chair of the Board or relevant Sub-Committee.**

4. Cabinet responses to scrutiny comments on called-in decisions should be circulated to all members of the Overview and Scrutiny Board as well as other Members supporting the call-in.
5. Cabinet supports the Board's request for scrutiny reports to be received two weeks ahead of publication as this will facilitate earlier pre-meets and general consideration of the material.
6. That Cabinet supports the Board reviewing its work programme and its ongoing efforts to make the scrutiny process as effective as possible.
7. That a protocol be developed for working practices between Cabinet and the Overview and Scrutiny Board including, but not limited to, the issues outlined in the recommendations above.

Chairman

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