

REPORT TO: SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

DATE: 15 MARCH 2016

TITLE: REVIEW OF HARLOW YOUTH COUNCIL

LEAD OFFICER: JANE GREER, HEAD OF COMMUNITY WELLBEING (01279) 446406

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RECOMMENDED that the Committee RECOMMENDS to Cabinet that the Harlow Youth Council Action Plan, at Appendix D of this report, is approved for implementation.

BACKGROUND

1. At its meeting on 8 December 2015, the Committee considered the scoping report for the Review of Harlow Youth Council. A wide range of activity has taken place since then, including
 - a) the attendance of current and former Youth Councillors at a Committee meeting as witnesses
 - b) a survey of existing Youth Councillors and former Youth Councillors
 - c) on-line survey for Harlow young people
 - d) visit to Epping Forest Youth Council
 - e) meeting with Chelmsford City Council
 - f) ad-hoc liaison with District and Borough Councils in the Council's audit family
 - g) a questionnaire distributed to ten Youth Councils across the country.

The purpose of this activity was to learn more about how other youth councils operate; to identify good practice elsewhere and consider new ways of working which would increase the overall effectiveness and prominence of HYC.

2. Results of the survey of current Harlow Youth Councillors revealed that most young people join HYC to make new friends and gain opportunities to represent the voice of young people in relation to issues that affect them. However, not all current members could say how they consult with young people; how they make a difference personally or how they ensure young people's views are heard. Some members could not say what has changed as a result of HYC whereas others were able to identify key areas in which

HYC has made a difference to Harlow young people (these included the Skate Park; Youth Cafe; Healthy Harlow Map and raising awareness of young people's mental health issues). A blank copy of the questionnaire completed by current Youth Councillors is attached as Appendix A.

3. The survey of current Youth Councillors identified opportunities for improving the effectiveness of HYC by:
 - a) reducing opportunities for conflict between Youth Councillors;
 - b) ensuring HYC meetings and projects groups are more focussed;
 - c) ensuring that project work is targeted, structured and has a clear timescale for completion;
 - d) helping members maintain a healthy balance between life at home, school and HYC
 - e) increasing opportunities for promotion of HYC and its individual members.

4. An online survey for young people was developed and made available through the Council's website from 30 November 2015 to 28 December 2015. The aim of the survey was to identify the level of young people's knowledge and awareness of HYC and its role for and on behalf of Harlow young people and also to generate an interest amongst young people who had not previously heard of HYC. The survey was promoted by Youth Councillors and the online link was distributed through a number of local networks. Regrettably, only three responses were received and only one of the respondents was within the 13-19 age group for Harlow Youth Council. This volume of responses is much lower than anticipated and as such we were not able to obtain an effective analysis or summary of young people's views. For future reference it has been noted that it is probably not ideal to undertake a survey with young people so close to the Christmas period, but on this occasion it was unavoidable due to the timescales for reports to Scrutiny Committee.

5. Attendance at the Epping Forest Youth Council meeting on 12 January 2016 enabled officers to draw comparisons with a youth council that borders Harlow geographically, operating a similar delivery model to Harlow and where issues affecting young people may be very similar. As a direct result of the meeting, plans are now in place to undertake a joint project to raise awareness of mental health issues affecting young people and to promote the provision of local mental health services for young people in Harlow and Epping. Joint working with Epping Forest Youth Council in the future will provide opportunities for wider promotion and greater recognition of the good work being undertaken by both groups.

6. Nine members of HYC attended the meeting with Epping Forest Youth Council and some of these felt that HYC should adopt a more structured and

formal approach to full Youth Council meetings at which members of the public are welcome to attend and guest speakers are invited. Examples of this would be

- a) having name place cards;
- b) addressing the Chair of the meeting rather than having off-shoot conversations;
- c) wearing the HYC uniform;
- d) having a member of staff to take minutes and publishing minutes on the Council's website.

The view was that by adopting this approach HYC meetings will be more focussed and effective and Youth Councillors will acquire relevant essential skills for attending formal Council and external meetings on behalf of HYC. Publishing the minutes on the Council's website will also raise awareness of the group and the important work that it is undertaking on behalf of young people in Harlow.

7. It was noted that Epping Forest Youth Council only meet once a month and members are expected to undertake project work and other relevant tasks independently on behalf of the group in-between meetings. This approach can help members manage a more healthy home/school/Youth Council life balance and reduce pressures felt by Youth Councillors to attend weekly meetings. Members of Epping Forest Youth Council reported feeling fully supported by Epping Forest District Council staff and elected Councillors. It should be noted that Epping Forest Youth Council has one full time Youth Council support worker and one part-time Youth Council support worker in comparison to Harlow which employs one part-time support worker for just 17.5 hours a week.
8. The Youth and Citizenship Manager and Youth Council Support Worker met with two Ward Councillors and the Youth Community Engagement Officer from Chelmsford City Council with the intention of identifying similarities and sharing good practice in relation to engagement with young people. However, it became apparent that Chelmsford City Council does not directly support the Chelmsford Youth Council but instead has a Youth Forum consisting of approximately 200 young people who simply volunteer to be consulted via email on issues that may affect them. There is very little direct interface between Chelmsford City Council Officers and the young people registered on the consultation database and the arrangement they have in place with these young people is entirely different to a running an elected youth council. It was therefore difficult to draw any meaningful comparisons between the two groups. However, the representatives from Chelmsford City Council were extremely impressed by the Harlow model and expressed an intention to learn from good practice in Harlow and to maintain open communication with HYC in order to maximise opportunities for mutual learning going forward. Plans are now in place for HYC to contact Chelmsford Youth Council, which is supported by Essex County Council, outside the scope of this review to

identify opportunities for mutual learning.

9. Results of verbal liaison with Youth Councils in other areas revealed that there are many different models in place for operating a Youth Council. Not all Youth Councils are run or supported directly by city, district or borough councils and some groups are known as youth panels or youth forums rather than youth councils. There was also a vast difference in the way groups operate; the way in which young people are identified and recruited; the number of meetings held per month and the way in which project work is prioritised, undertaken and managed. For this reason it was difficult to draw direct comparisons with other areas and to make recommendations for change as a result of this activity. Indeed, it would seem more appropriate to simply always be aware of, and open to, opportunities to learn from identified good practice elsewhere and introduce changes as and when it is relevant to HYC and will enhance the overall effectiveness of the group.
10. A questionnaire was developed and circulated to ten youth councils across the country, including to a number of district and boroughs in the Council's audit family. However, only one response was received so again it was difficult to draw any direct comparisons or learn from good practice elsewhere as a result of this activity. A copy of the questionnaire is attached as Appendix B.
11. At the Scrutiny Committee meeting on 15 September 2015, Councillors specifically requested that the review of HYC include an enquiry in to how Harlow Council could better support HYC to increase its prominence and overall effectiveness and raise the profile of individual HYC members. As a result of this request, HYC members were consulted at a full HYC meeting on 7 December 2015 and a summary of responses can be seen at Appendix C.

CONCLUSION

12. Evidence obtained in this review suggests Harlow Youth Councillors are enthusiastic and engaged and the Youth Council compares favourably with other similar bodies in the region in terms of its impact and effectiveness. The review has also identified a number of ways in which the Harlow Youth Council might be improved and Youth Councillors assisted in performing their roles. An action plan outlining these actions is attached as Appendix D and the Committee is asked to recommend it to Cabinet for approval.

IMPLICATIONS

Place (includes Sustainability)

None specific.

Author: **Graeme Bloomer, Head of Place**

Finance (Includes ICT)

None specific.

Author: **Simon Freeman, Head of Finance**

Housing

None specific.

Author: **Andrew Murray, Head of Housing**

Community Wellbeing (includes Equalities and Social Inclusion)

None specific.

Author: **Jane Greer, Head of Community Wellbeing**

Governance (includes HR)

None specific.

Author: **Brian Keane, Head of Governance**

Background Papers

[These are papers referred to in the preparation of the report that are not attached as appendices but that are available for public or Councillor study.]

Glossary of terms/abbreviations used

HYC – Harlow Youth Council

APPENDIX A

Harlow Youth Council Scrutiny Review

Questionnaire for Youth Councillors

1	(A) How long have you been a Youth Councillor? (B) How old are you?
2	What made you want to join Harlow Youth Council?
3	Does your school support you to be a Youth Councillor? If yes please say how. If not please say what support you would like from your school.
4	How do you consult with other young people in your role as a Youth Councillor?
5	How do you feedback to other Youth Councillors and make sure that the voice of young people you have spoken to is heard?
6	What things have changed for Harlow young people as a direct result of Harlow Youth Council activity? Can you name three?

7	How have you personally helped other young people in Harlow? Please give examples.
8	How has Harlow Youth Council helped you to develop as an individual? Please give examples including any new skills that you have gained.
9	Please list the top 5 issues that you think affect young people in Harlow today. 1. 2. 3. 4. 5.
10	Please list the top 5 issues that affect <u>you</u> today (these may not necessarily be the same as those you have listed in Q9 above). Note: Your answers will be treated in confidence. 1. 2. 3. 4. 5.
11	What is the best thing about being a Youth Councillor?
12	What is the worst thing about being a Youth Councillor?
13	What could be done to improve Harlow Youth Council? Please list any ideas you have – continue on a separate sheet if necessary.

14	Please use this space for any other comments you want to make about Harlow Youth Council and/or being a Youth Councillor.
	Your name (Optional):-

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire.

Your views are very important to Harlow Council

APPENDIX B

Youth Council Questionnaire	
Name of your Youth Council/Panel	
How long has your Youth Council been established?	
Which organisation runs your Youth Council?	
How is your Youth Council funded? Please state if you have more than one source of funding.	
How many paid workers support Youth Council and how many hours do they work each week?	
Do Ward Councillors support the work of your Youth Council? If so please briefly describe how.	
Do Ward Councillors help to promote and raise the profile of your Youth Council? If so, please briefly say how.	
Do Youth Councillors attend formal Council meetings? If so, roughly how many a year do they attend and how do you ensure that young people's opinions are reflected in local decision making processes?	
How often do your Youth Councillors meet as a whole team?	
How does your Youth Council decide it's priorities for the coming year?	

How many Youth Councillors do you have and what is the age range?	
Please use the space overleaf if there is anything else you would like to let us know about your Youth Council.	

Thank you for taking the time to complete and return this questionnaire.

Please return to christine.selby@harlow.gov.uk

Harlow Youth Council Scrutiny Review 2015/16

At the meeting of the Scrutiny Committee on 15 September 2015 Members requested the Review incorporate the following line of enquiry.

‘How can Harlow Council increase prominence of Harlow Youth Council and its individual members?’

The question was subsequently included on the agenda for the full Youth Council meeting on 7 December 2015 when Youth Councillors had the opportunity to discuss and agree on a number of ways in which they felt the Council could provide support.

Suggestions emerging from discussion at the Full HYC meeting were noted as follows:-

- Strengthen and maintain relationships between adult and youth Councillors – have regular meetings and/or communicate regularly by email.
- Ward Councillors could attend Full HYC meetings once a month
- Hold a ‘Speed Meeting’ event after the annual elections in May – meet to get to know each other and hear about ward specific issues. Make it an informal event with a social element i.e. sharing a Pizza together.
- Members should invite Youth Councillors to HDC meetings more frequently and actively seek Youth Councillor’s opinions on local issues that affect them
- Support a regular HYC article in the Harlow Times magazine
- Support relevant HYC articles in WIS - i.e. Youth Conference, Big Debate etc.
- Support regular articles in the Harlow Star and on Your Harlow
- Support to develop and maintain a better, more interactive HYC website
- Have a FB page monitored by HDC Communications Team
- Member of the Council’s Communications Team to attend Full HYC meetings to give advice on promotion opportunities etc.
- HYC representatives to have regular meetings with Head of Community Wellbeing
- Youth Councillor to accompany Chair of Council to Civic events – help to raise profile of HYC and individual Youth Councillors (rotate Youth Councillor attendance)
- Commitment from Ward Councillors to promote HYC in their own wards

In addition the following issues were raised:-

- Youth Councillors are willing to attend Councillor's surgeries but many no longer hold surgeries regularly
- Some Youth Councillors feel that Ward Councillors don't take them seriously or respect their views – an example of this was that the majority of evidence gathering questions were directed at the adult witness at the Scrutiny Committee meeting on 8 December 2015 rather than Councillors seeking the views of the young witness that was present.
- Ward Councillors do not always respond to emails from Youth Councillors and this affects the ability to build effective working relationships
- The Portfolio Holder is not always able to attend full HYC meetings so Youth Councillors don't have a regular opportunity to ask questions or provide direct feedback. Could another Councillor attend in the absence of the Portfolio Holder?

APPENDIX D

**Harlow Youth Council Scrutiny Review 2015 – 2016
Action Plan**

Action	Purpose	By Who	Timescale
1. HYC nominated representative to receive regular support from Harlow Council's Communications Team.	To raise greater public awareness and understanding of the role of HYC and its individual members; enhance opportunities for better, more frequent promotion of HYC and introduce the targeted use of social media to engage Harlow young people.	Youth Council Support Worker. Youth Council representative. Communications Team	March 2016 and on-going. Note: Initial meeting booked for 1 March 2016.
2. HYC to pursue the possibility of a nominated representative attending Civic functions with the Chair of the Council on a regular basis.	To raise the public profile of HYC and its individual members and promote the good work that HYC undertakes on behalf of all Harlow young people.	Youth Council Support Worker. Youth Councillors. Corporate Governance Team. Current Chair of the Council. Members.	March 2016.
3. Host an annual 'Speed Meeting' event with Members.	To foster good working relationships between Youth Councillors and Members and ensure a good understanding of each-others role in the community as well as an awareness	Youth Council Support Worker. Youth Councillors. Corporate Governance Team. Members.	May 2016 and annually thereafter.

	and understanding of ward based issues.		
4. Deliver a training activity to Youth Councillors that will increase knowledge and understanding of Community Engagement and the range of Consultation methods and tools available to them.	To ensure that Youth Councillors are aware of how to engage and consult with other young people and how to feedback information to HYC in order to help identify priorities and develop and deliver future projects.	Youth Council Support Worker.	June 2016
5. Deliver a training activity to Youth Councillors that will increase knowledge and understanding of project management.	To ensure Youth Councillors understand how to identify, plan, manage and deliver projects within given timescales.	Youth Council Support Worker.	June 2016
6. Review the format and frequency of HYC meetings.	To ensure that meetings are as effective as possible; to assist Youth Councillors manage a healthy home/school/ HYC life balance and to help Youth Councillors develop essential skills for later life.	Youth and Citizenship Manager. Youth Council Support Worker. Youth Councillors.	July 2016
7. Actively pursue opportunities for cross border working with Epping Forest Youth Council.	To raise the profile of HYC across a wider geographical area; embrace opportunities to learn from good practice elsewhere and to work in	Youth Council Support Worker. Youth Councillors.	July 2016

	partnership to address priority issues that affect young people in both Harlow and Epping Forest districts.		
8. HYC nominated representatives to attend at least four formal Harlow Council meetings each year.	To raise awareness of HYC and ensure that Youth Councillors have the opportunity to influence local decision making about issues that affect young people in Harlow.	Youth Councillors. Youth Council Support Worker. Corporate Governance Team. Members.	On-going.
9. HYC representatives to meet quarterly with Head of Community Wellbeing.	To maximise opportunities for information sharing and foster good working relationships between HYC and senior officers in the Council.	Youth Council Support Worker. Youth Councillors. Head of Community Wellbeing	Quarterly, on-going.
10. On behalf of all Harlow young people, actively seek and act on opportunities to learn from good practice in other areas and make appropriate changes to the format and delivery model of HYC as and when it will increase overall effectiveness of the group.	To maximise opportunities for learning and increase overall effectiveness of HYC in the longer term.	Head of Community Wellbeing. Youth & Citizenship Manager. Youth Council Support Worker. Youth Councillors.	On-going.