

Transformation Programme – Building Harlow’s Future



Report to: Cabinet

Date: 10 December 2024

Portfolio Holders: Councillor Dan Swords, Leader of the Council
Councillor Hannah Ellis, Portfolio Holder for Corporate Services and Transformation

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Key Decision: No

Forward Plan: Forward Plan number I017757

Call In: This item is subject to call in procedures

Corporate Mission: Deliver High-Performing Council Services

Wards Affected: None specifically

Recommended that:

- A** Cabinet endorses the transformation programme, Building Harlow's Future, as set out in appendix A.
- B** Cabinet receives quarterly updates on activity and progress within the programme.

Reason for decision

- A** A Local Government Association Peer Challenge was carried out in 2023 and, whilst recognising the significant improvements that had been made, highlighted the need for broader structural and cultural changes within Harlow Council.
- B** Our Transformation Programme 'Building Harlow's Future' will address these cultural and structural changes to release the potential within both the Council and our town, to create a better future for residents.
- C** We want to drive best practice and create an organisational culture where innovation and progression are the norm.
- D** We want to safeguard against any risk of financial or staffing instability in future years by creating structures within Harlow Council that work more agilely and flexibly.
- E** We want to make the most of all the opportunities to change our town for the better by continuing our work to regenerate our town centre and neighbourhoods and seeking our further investment in our town.
- F** And we want to provide the best possible services for Harlow residents as efficiently as possible, delivering on the high standards expected of us whilst keeping council tax down and providing value for money for taxpayers.

Other Options

- A** Harlow Council could continue to operate in its current form and culture. This is not recommended because we want to build a better future for Harlow and the change needed to achieve this has been recognised by peers and experts in local government.
- B** We could not establish a Transformation Programme. This is not recommended because it would mean we are left with outdated processes and systems, weaker service resilience for residents, fewer opportunities to regenerate and drive investment into our town and a less efficient council for taxpayers.
- C** The Council could review different service deliveries in isolation as part of a piecemeal improvement process, based on future budget parameters only. This is not recommended because wider cultural and structural changes would embed more significant and continuous improvement and result in a better outcome for residents.

Executive Summary

- A** Harlow Council is already undergoing significant transformation which has been recognised nationally in the Local Government Chronicle Awards as well as by the Local Government Association. That transformation work must now be accelerated to ensure

the Council delivers the best possible services and future for Harlow residents. The Council has a clear plan to enable transformation, and this report sets out the next steps.

Background

1. In February 2023, the Local Government Association (LGA) carried out a Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) on the council. The CPC highlighted the many years of stagnation within the Council and detailed a number of key challenges we faced.
2. We implemented significant changes in 2023 ahead of the completion of a subsequent CPC Progress Review.
3. This CPC Progress Review resulted in a further report, which recognised that progress had been made. It reflected the commencement of our transformation work in many areas, whilst recognising that the Council needed to go much further and was just starting its journey.
4. Following the CPC Progress Review, at the LGA's instigation, Harlow Council was nominated for the Local Government Chronicle's 'Most Improved Council of the Year' Award. The CPC Progress Review report was at the heart of the nomination recommendation. The Council was shortlisted and eventually named the second 'Most Improved Council of the Year' in the UK. This is a testament to the remarkable work that members and officers have already undertaken.
5. The Council has continued to transform the way it operates and does business in 2024, including but not limited to:
 - A new Corporate Plan and six, clearly defined, missions to drive the organisation which has already resulted in enormous progress for residents.
 - A balanced budget and strong Medium Term Financial Plan which builds on the General Fund budget surplus in 2023/24 and projected surplus for this financial year.
 - A dramatically improved reporting system for finance, performance and risk.
 - A significant improvement month on month in nearly all Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and Office for Local Government (OFLOG) performance measures.
 - A much stronger programme of work for the Scrutiny Committee.
 - A new Personnel Committee to ensure political oversight of how the organisation leads, manages and supports its staff.

- The refurbishment of the Council Chamber to embrace modern technology, improve the quality of meetings, and ensure full public access to council meetings.
 - A new Union Facilities Agreement and a programme to review and update all HR policies.
 - A programme to further improve both internal and external communications.
 - A full restructuring of the senior management of the council which had previously been promised but not completed until now.
 - Implementation of a Flexible Use of Capital Receipts Strategy – the first ever in Harlow but widely used across most other councils – to enable funding for the transformation programme and its associated activities.
6. Without a significant acceleration in the Council's transformation, progress will stagnate, and our ambitious corporate missions will not be delivered in full, both now and for the future. That is why the Council is now embarking on the largest and most comprehensive programme of change in its history.

Transformation Programme

7. Many forward-thinking councils across the country have implemented transformation programmes that focus on fundamentally redesigning services through robust and structured programme management arrangements. This approach frees up organisational capacity to focus on what really matters for residents. For some councils, this has resulted in large budget savings and better value for money for taxpayers. For others, it has simply resulted in greater efficiencies in service delivery and resource management.
8. Harlow Council has not implemented a transformation programme thus far and, whilst much progress has been made to improve council services, we must now go further and faster to embed more significant and continuous improvement and longer-term change. To that end, a new Transformation Programme: *Building Harlow's Future* is proposed.
9. *Building Harlow's Future* is a fundamental programme to modernise the council into a more efficient and effective local authority and in turn, deliver better outcomes and services for local residents.
10. Central to the Programme will be a drive to improve workplace structures and culture, further strengthen the council's focus on data and evidence-led decision making and explore new partnership opportunities. We want to ensure that the Council is much better placed to attract and retain the very best talent at all levels.

11. Every work stream and service of the council will be captured in the transformation programme including HTS and any other service the council commissions externally. Radical and transformative opportunities will be explored, concentrating on productivity over activity so we can drive a culture of continuous improvement that is focused on outputs as opposed to inputs.
12. A Transformation Reserve has already been established by utilising the General Fund budget surplus from 2023/24 and further funding will be allocated as necessary and appropriate in line with the Council's Flexible Use of Capital Receipts Strategy.
13. Strong governance measures will be in place to assess, implement, monitor and evaluate projects as part of the Transformation Programme. The Programme will be led by the Leader, Cabinet and Executive Management Team. It will be supported by the LGA and external experts to ensure best practice is followed and give assurance that appropriate safeguards are in place.
14. Progress will be reported to Cabinet in the regular Finance, Performance and Risk reports. An annual update on the Programme will be reported to Full Council as part of an annual Corporate Plan report.

Implications

Equality and Diversity

The Public Sector Equality Duty requires the Council to consider how to positively contribute to the advancement of equality and good relations and demonstrate 'due regard' in our decision making in the design of policies and in the delivery of services. Officers believe this programme may engage our Equality Duty and will ensure that a full impact assessment is carried out to ensure accessibility and opportunity for all.

Climate Change

This report has no direct impact on Climate Change.

Finance

The council is seeking to manage expenditure against its growth requirements; ensuring resources in its medium-term financial planning are aligned to current and future service delivery requirements. The council's Flexible Use of Capital Receipts strategy allows for use of capital receipts to fund up to £2 million of qualifying transformation expenditure, with no impact on the council's prudential indicators. A Transformation earmarked reserve was established for the year ending 31 March 2024 of £144,000 to fund revenue expenditure of the transformation programme.

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Governance

None, this report is for endorsing only but recognises the proposed governance and assurance of the programme which demonstrates best practice.

Author: Julie Galvin, Legal Services Manager and Monitoring Officer

Appendices

Appendix A – Building Harlow's Future – Transformation Framework

Background Papers

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Harlow 2023

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge follow up review – Harlow 2023

Glossary of terms/abbreviations used

None