Harrow
Monitoring
Group
publication

Putting Residents First – or Putting the Council First?

A critical review of Harrow Council's resident-first claim in practice

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Executive summary

"Putting Residents First" has become a prominent political and public-facing slogan of Harrow Council's Conservative administration, conveying an image of a council whose decisions, services and ways of working are centred on its residents. The principle itself is entirely appropriate: putting residents first should be fundamental to local government. However, precisely because the phrase is used so prominently, it should be treated as a public claim capable of being tested against evidence rather than as evidence of achievement in itself. This review therefore asks whether residents actually experience the promise when they participate in consultations, seek information, challenge decisions, require council services or attempt to engage with those exercising political and administrative authority.

The evidence does not support a simplistic conclusion that Harrow Council never puts residents first. The council has expanded contact arrangements, developed consultation mechanisms and reported improvement in the proportion of residents who believe their views are taken into account. There are residents who receive effective services and constructive engagement. The more difficult question is whether that experience is sufficiently consistent, accessible and inclusive to justify a slogan expressed in universal terms. The evidence examined in this review suggests that the relevant issue may sometimes be not whether Harrow puts residents first, but whether it puts all residents first, particularly those who find council systems difficult to navigate, require different forms of support, depend upon complex statutory services or raise persistent and uncomfortable questions.

That concern emerges from Harrow's own experience rather than from abstract principles of good local government. The Local Plan and other planning and waste consultations raise questions about whether technically compliant consultation always provides ordinary residents with sufficiently clear information and meaningful opportunities to participate. The inadequate Ofsted judgement, subsequent Government Improvement Notice and later weaknesses identified in important parts of Children's Services, including independent reviewing arrangements and CYADS, demonstrate that governance and improvement mechanisms can exist while significant weaknesses remain in residents' actual experience of services. The CQC assessment of adult social care similarly identified difficulties for some residents despite established access and oversight arrangements. Questions about engagement with elected members and senior officers, the completeness of public communication, and the handling of external challenge further test whether providing a process through which residents can communicate necessarily means that they are substantively heard.

Taken together, these examples raise a broader organisational question about the balance between process assurance and resident assurance. Compliance with statutory, regulatory and procedural requirements is essential, but Harrow's own evidence demonstrates why the existence of a consultation, referral pathway, response process, improvement board, policy or performance measure cannot by itself establish that the resident has been put first. The recurring test is what happened after the process was used: whether the resident could understand it, participate effectively, receive a substantive response and obtain an appropriate outcome. In a diverse borough, this also means recognising that identical provision does not necessarily produce equal access, particularly for disabled residents, older people, families navigating SEND and social care, and people facing language, digital or other barriers.

Compensation, Ombudsman findings and expenditure arising when decisions or services go wrong add a further dimension. Their significance is not simply financial: the affected person may experience the original failure while residents collectively bear the cost of putting it right. The resident-first test is therefore also whether Harrow identifies what went wrong, where accountability rested, whether risks should have been recognised earlier, what changed as a result and how senior management and elected members are assured that similar failures will not recur. The central finding of this review is consequently not that Harrow never puts residents first, but that the evidence raises a legitimate question about whether the slogan is being translated consistently into the experience of all residents. Where process, compliance or institutional convenience become more visible than accessibility, substantive engagement, empathy, learning and outcomes, "Putting Residents First" risks describing an aspiration or public image more convincingly than the reality experienced by some of the people the council serves.

1. The promise behind "Putting Residents First"

Harrow's Conservative administration has repeatedly used "Putting Residents First" as a public-facing expression of how it says the council should operate. Its Corporate Plan associates the phrase with improving the way services are delivered, making it easier for residents to have their say and enabling people to access the services they need. The council has reported more than 59,000 visitors to MyHarrow Talk and 11,703 consultation responses since the platform was launched. It has also reported an increase in the proportion of residents who believe the council takes account of their views, from 32 per cent in 2023 to 58 per cent in 2024, and an increase from 28 per cent to 37 per cent in those believing they can influence local decisions. These are significant measures because they show that the administration publicly associates "Putting Residents First" with resident engagement and that there has been reported improvement in public perception.

Harrow has also taken practical measures intended to improve access, including opening a Resident Contact Centre and providing telephone and in-person routes alongside digital services. Such measures are capable of improving the experience of residents and should form part of any balanced assessment of the administration's record. However, these measures do not in themselves establish that residents are being put first; rather, they help establish the standard against which the wider "Putting Residents First" claim should be judged. If the phrase is intended to mean easier access, meaningful participation and better services, then accessibility, responsiveness, transparency and resident outcomes become appropriate tests of whether it is actually being delivered. The danger with any political slogan, irrespective of which party uses it, is that repetition can gradually become a substitute for evidence. "Putting Residents First" should therefore be treated not as evidence of a resident-first council, but as a public claim whose credibility depends upon what residents actually experience in practice.

2. Consultation: the difference between a process and meaningful participation

Consultation provides one of the clearest tests of whether residents are genuinely being put first because consultation should give people an informed opportunity to influence decisions that affect them. Meaningful public consultation requires more than publication of documents and an invitation to submit representations. Residents need adequate and balanced information, presented sufficiently

clearly and early enough for them to understand what is proposed, the likely implications and the available alternatives. There must also be a genuine possibility that representations can influence the outcome rather than consultation becoming principally an exercise in demonstrating that a statutory or corporate requirement has been completed.

The Harrow Local Plan provides an important example because it will influence development, housing, infrastructure, neighbourhoods and the environment for years. Harrow undertook Regulation 18 consultation during 2024 and subsequently progressed through Regulation 19. The council states that representations were reviewed and changes made where considered appropriate. The issue is therefore not whether consultation occurred; it plainly did. The more demanding resident-first question is whether a process involving a substantial Local Plan, an Atlas of Change, impact assessments and numerous supporting and technical documents was sufficiently intelligible and navigable for ordinary residents to participate on reasonably informed terms. Professional planners, developers and organised interests inevitably approach complex planning documents with resources and expertise unavailable to many individual residents. Formal equality of access to the same documents does not necessarily provide equality of opportunity to understand and influence the process.

Similar concerns arise in waste planning. Where proposed sites affect communities already experiencing environmental pressures and substantial vehicle movements, including HGV movements associated with the Forward Drive waste and recycling facility, consultation should provide residents with clear information about traffic, environmental effects, cumulative impacts, alternatives and the reasoning underlying site selection. Meaningful consultation needs to provide clear and adequate informed choices. The existence of a questionnaire or opportunity to submit comments does not in itself demonstrate that residents have been equipped to make those choices. The same principle extends to significant individual planning applications: statutory notices, website publication and consultation periods may satisfy procedural requirements, but a resident-first planning service should also consider whether people affected can reasonably understand what is proposed and what its practical consequences may be. The distinction is therefore between consultation as a procedural event and consultation as meaningful democratic participation.

3. Community engagement: from communication to listening, understanding and assurance

There is a related question about the quality of engagement by Harrow's elected members and senior officers with residents and community organisations outside formal consultations. The evidence does not suggest that Harrow never listens: the council's own survey data indicate improvement in the proportion of residents who believe their views are taken into account. The concern is whether that experience is sufficiently consistent and inclusive to justify the broader promise of "Putting Residents First". A council may engage effectively with some residents, on some issues and through some channels while others find it considerably harder to be heard, particularly when they raise persistent, complex or uncomfortable questions.

A genuinely resident-first authority should not regard engagement principally as providing channels through which people can contact the council. Meaningful engagement is reciprocal: it requires listening, explaining decisions, responding substantively to legitimate questions, engaging

constructively with criticism and demonstrating where community knowledge or representations have influenced policy or service improvement. This is particularly important for individual residents and community organisations that lack professional lobbyists, institutional influence or routine access to senior decision-makers. If access and responsiveness vary significantly according to who is asking, how confidently they can navigate the council or whether what they are saying is convenient to hear, the result may be a council that puts some residents first rather than residents first.

Harrow's experience illustrates why communication should not automatically be equated with engagement. Publishing information is not necessarily engagement; acknowledging correspondence is not necessarily answering it; inviting comments is not necessarily listening; and conducting a consultation is not necessarily sharing influence. Where legitimate questions concerning expenditure, governance, performance or service failures receive narrowly procedural responses, do not address the substance of what has been raised, or receive no meaningful response, residents may reasonably question how "Putting Residents First" operates when engagement becomes challenging rather than supportive. **Constructive external scrutiny should be regarded as useful intelligence and an additional source of assurance, rather than simply as criticism to be dismissed or correspondence to be ignored or administratively disposed of.**

Elected members, particularly executive members responsible for council services and policy, have an important responsibility because representative democracy does not end at the ballot box. They should remain accessible to residents, listen to concerns and be prepared to explain the decisions for which they are politically accountable. Senior officers occupy a different constitutional position, but they administer substantial public resources, advise elected members and exercise important public functions. Legitimate questions about the administration, governance and performance of those services should therefore receive meaningful responses where disclosure is appropriate. This is particularly relevant in Harrow where significant questions have arisen across areas examined in this review, including Children's Services, SEND, adult social care, planning and consultation, expenditure and public communication.

The quality of these relationships reveals something important about organisational culture. The issue is not whether Harrow has mechanisms through which residents can communicate with the council; plainly it does. The more searching question is what happens after residents use them, particularly when they challenge the council rather than agree with it. Are they listened to, answered and treated as contributors to better public administration, or primarily regarded as recipients to whom decisions and services are communicated? That distinction goes directly to the credibility of "Putting Residents First", because a commitment expressed in universal terms should ultimately be capable of being experienced by all residents, including those whose questions, experiences or criticisms are difficult for the authority to hear.

This also exposes a less obvious form of "ignoring" that a resident-first authority needs to recognise. Residents do not have to be deliberately disregarded in order to experience being ignored. A representation may be logged, an email acknowledged, a complaint processed or a consultation response counted, yet the substance of what the resident has said may receive little meaningful consideration or influence. Decision-makers may not regard this as ignoring anyone because the

organisation can demonstrate that its procedure was followed. From the resident's perspective, however, that distinction may be largely academic if the question remains unanswered, the evidence presented is not addressed or there is no indication that their contribution was seriously considered.

In this sense, "ignoring" can be organisational as well as individual and can occur without deliberate intent. Systems that prioritise processing correspondence, meeting response targets, completing consultations or demonstrating procedural compliance can create the appearance of engagement without establishing whether the resident has actually been heard. Legitimate concerns may pass through an administrative system without requiring anyone to engage adequately with their substance. **A council can consequently process a resident's communication without genuinely hearing the resident who made it. Perhaps the most difficult form of ignoring to identify is therefore the kind an organisation does not realise it is doing.**

For Harrow, this creates an important assurance question. It is not enough to establish that residents were invited to comment or that correspondence received a response. Decision-makers should also be able to satisfy themselves that the substance of what residents raised was properly considered and, where appropriate, influenced the decision, explanation or subsequent action. Otherwise, the council may record that consultation and engagement have occurred while some of the residents involved experience precisely the opposite.

This has particular implications for Harrow's executive members. They depend substantially upon officer reports, professional advice, performance information and recommendations when making decisions and exercising political oversight. If executive members do not themselves recognise how residents can be effectively "ignored" while formal processes are operating correctly, it becomes difficult for them to test whether the information and recommendations placed before them adequately reflect the experiences, aspirations and differing needs of the residents they have committed themselves to putting first.

Their scrutiny of officer advice should therefore extend beyond satisfying themselves that a recommendation is legally and procedurally sound. They should also ask whether residents affected by a proposed decision have been properly understood; whether their concerns and alternative perspectives are fairly represented; whether particular groups may experience the decision differently; whether barriers to access have been considered; and whether the recommended course reflects empathy and an understanding of its practical consequences. An officer report can be professionally competent and legally compliant while still presenting an issue predominantly through the administrative perspective of the council. Political leadership provides an additional test: **does the recommendation merely satisfy what the council is required to do, or does it also reflect what an administration genuinely committed to "Putting Residents First" should do?**

Empathy and compassion therefore need to influence how problems are understood, how options are developed and how decisions are made, rather than appearing simply as desirable language in policies or public statements. Executive members have an important assurance role in testing whether officer advice looks outward from the institution towards residents as well as inward towards procedure, organisational requirements and legal compliance. **If political decision-makers do not recognise what being "ignored" can look like from the resident's side of the council's**

processes, they may unintentionally provide political assurance for an administrative system that is procedurally correct while still failing to hear some of the people it exists to serve.

4. Transparency and public communication

Transparency provides another important test because residents cannot scrutinise public decisions effectively unless they are given a sufficiently complete account of them. In August 2026, Harrow Council announced that residents would benefit from a £1.4 million investment through London Talent Pathways. Its news release stated that the investment had been "secured by Learn Harrow" and referred to London Talent Pathways as "our new programme", while the announcement did not adequately explain the external origin of the funding. The opportunities provided through the programme were positive, but that does not remove the need for clarity about where public money originates.

The example may appear comparatively minor beside failures in statutory services, but it illustrates an important principle. Public-sector communication should primarily enable residents to understand what has happened, who is responsible and how public resources have been obtained or used, rather than present events predominantly through the institutional perspective most favourable to the authority publishing the information. Transparency is not an optional enhancement to communication; it is part of accountability. A resident-first culture should therefore encourage communications that provide the relevant context even where doing so means sharing credit, acknowledging difficulties or explaining uncomfortable facts.

5. Children's services, SEND and the test of vulnerability

Harrow's experience demonstrates why the existence of improvement plans, governance boards, policies, professional procedures and performance monitoring cannot itself establish that children and families are being put first. Following the inadequate Ofsted judgement in January 2025, the council became subject to a Government Improvement Notice and an extensive improvement programme. Yet subsequent Ofsted monitoring continued to identify weaknesses in important parts of service delivery and assurance. Concerns about the effectiveness of independent reviewing arrangements were particularly significant because Independent Reviewing Officers are themselves intended to provide oversight and challenge on behalf of children in care. Later findings concerning the Children and Young Adults with Disabilities Service (CYADS) brought the issue even closer to the "Putting Residents First" test: some of Harrow's most vulnerable children and their families were experiencing weaknesses within the very services intended to protect and support them. The issue is therefore not theoretical. Harrow has had governance, management and assurance arrangements in place while independent inspection has nevertheless identified significant weaknesses in what parts of the system were delivering.

Special Educational Needs and/or Disabilities (SEND) makes that contradiction particularly important. Harrow has produced a Local SEND Reform Plan for 2026–2029, setting out governance, improvement activity and intended changes, while this work is taking place against the wider background of weaknesses already identified in Children's Services and, specifically, CYADS. For parents and carers, however, the existence of a reform plan is not the outcome. Their experience is determined by whether their child can access the service, whether needs are recognised and assessed without unreasonable delay, whether education, health and social care work together, whether

parents are listened to and whether promised support actually reaches the child. In this context, "Putting Residents First" requires Harrow to demonstrate not simply that improvement structures have been established, but that those structures are producing measurable improvements in the experiences and outcomes of children and families. Otherwise, there remains a risk that the council can demonstrate that improvement is being managed without yet demonstrating that improvement is being experienced.

6. Adult social care and the experience of access

Adult social care provides another important independent test. The Care Quality Commission rated Harrow's adult social-care provision as "requires improvement" and reported mixed experiences among people using services and carers. Its assessment identified difficulties experienced by some people in obtaining information, concerns about the accessibility of digital routes for older residents, and instances in which assessments or reviews were not regarded as sufficiently timely or person-centred. These findings are particularly relevant to a resident-first commitment because social care frequently involves people who may already be dealing with disability, frailty, caring responsibilities, isolation or other circumstances that make complex administrative systems particularly difficult to navigate.

The CQC assessment also identified positive practice, including work with seldom-heard communities, staff understanding of Harrow's diverse population and senior-level mechanisms for monitoring performance and risk. A balanced assessment should recognise those strengths. Their coexistence with identified weaknesses, however, reinforces the central argument of this review: an authority can possess governance arrangements, performance monitoring and committed staff while residents still encounter problems accessing timely, understandable and person-centred services. Corporate assurance is therefore incomplete unless it incorporates evidence about what happens to residents at the end of the systems being monitored.

7. Different needs require different responses

Harrow's diversity makes the question of who can actually access council services particularly important to any claim of "Putting Residents First". Residents do not approach the council with equal knowledge, confidence, language skills, digital ability or capacity to navigate complex administrative systems. This is not merely a hypothetical concern. The CQC assessment of Harrow's adult social care found that some older residents struggled with technology as services moved increasingly towards digital access and identified difficulties around accessible information. The weaknesses identified within Children's Services and CYADS similarly demonstrate why accessibility cannot be separated from service quality. A parent already trying to secure appropriate support for a disabled child should not also need exceptional knowledge of council structures, statutory procedures or the boundaries between education, health and social care simply to find the right route through the system.

Harrow has taken steps to broaden access, including telephone and face-to-face provision through its Resident Contact Centre, and those developments should be recognised. However, the more demanding test is whether such accessibility extends consistently across the council's services and processes, particularly where residents are dealing with complex statutory provision rather than routine enquiries. Disabled residents may require reasonable adjustments; some residents may need interpretation or accessible formats; others may need advocacy or direct human assistance rather

than being referred repeatedly to websites, forms or different organisations. In a borough as diverse as Harrow, providing everybody with the same administrative route can therefore appear equal while producing very unequal experiences in practice.

This is also where empathy becomes relevant to Harrow's "Putting Residents First" claim. The council may be able to demonstrate that information was published, a consultation was available online, a referral pathway existed or a resident was directed to the appropriate procedure. Those facts establish that a process was available; they do not necessarily establish that the resident could understand, access or successfully use it. For Harrow, the real equality test should therefore be not simply whether the same door is open to everyone, but whether residents with different needs are realistically able to get through it**.** A council putting all residents first must consequently examine equality of access and outcome alongside equality of treatment; otherwise, the residents least able to navigate the system risk being the very residents least likely to experience the promise contained in the slogan.

8. The risk of a compliance-based and legalistic culture

The Harrow examples examined in this review raise a wider question about whether parts of the council's organisational culture have become too heavily centred on process and compliance. Compliance itself is essential; the concern is the repeated gap identified across consultation, Children's Services and CYADS, adult social care and engagement between demonstrating that an administrative mechanism exists and demonstrating that it worked for the resident. The recurring question is therefore not simply "Was the process followed?" but "What did the process actually achieve for the resident?"

The same evidence raises a related concern about an apparently legalistic approach to some aspects of council administration. Harrow must, of course, comply with its statutory obligations and protect itself and taxpayers against legal and financial risk. However, establishing that the council was entitled to follow a particular procedure, that the required notice was issued, that a consultation met the formal requirement, or that a response complied with an established process does not necessarily answer whether the resulting treatment of the resident was fair, proportionate, accessible or sensible. The £30,000 compensation payment arising from the protected-tree case is particularly relevant because it demonstrates that formally exercising a public decision-making function can still result in significant financial consequences when the eventual outcome goes against the authority. Ombudsman findings and other compensation arising from service failures similarly reinforce the need to look beyond whether a process existed to the quality of the judgement and outcome it produced.

Taken together, these examples do not establish that Harrow Council is universally compliance-driven or legalistic, and it would be wrong to suggest that every service operates in this way. They do, however, provide sufficient reason to ask whether procedural assurance sometimes carries greater organisational weight than resident assurance. A council can demonstrate that information was published, consultation undertaken, correspondence processed, a pathway followed or a statutory duty considered while the resident at the other end may still remain poorly informed, unheard or without an effective outcome. If "Putting Residents First" is to mean more than a public-facing slogan, Harrow's assurance mechanisms should therefore test both sides of the equation: not

only whether the council did what the rules required, but whether what it did actually worked for the resident.

That distinction also brings empathy into the question of governance. Empathy does not mean disregarding rules, conceding every complaint or giving residents whatever outcome they request. It means understanding how council systems and decisions are experienced by the people affected by them and allowing that understanding to inform administrative judgement. In Harrow, where residents may already be navigating complex planning procedures, SEND provision, social-care pathways, complaints systems or other council processes, procedural correctness alone cannot be the measure of a resident-first authority. Compliance can demonstrate that Harrow has done what it was required to do; "Putting Residents First" requires the council to demonstrate what difference doing it made for the resident.

9. When decisions go wrong: compensation, learning and accountability

Cases involving compensation, maladministration and expenditure arising when decisions or services go wrong provide another practical test of Harrow's "Putting Residents First" claim. Harrow has faced pothole and pavement compensation claims, Housing Ombudsman findings involving maladministration and compensation arising from other service failures. More recently, the council agreed a £30,000 compensation payment following a dispute concerning two protected trees after an insurer sought permission to fell them because of alleged subsidence and the council refused. These cases differ considerably in their circumstances and should not simply be combined as evidence of a single failure. What connects them, however, is that they represent occasions on which the consequences of a council decision, service failure or maladministration have ultimately carried a financial cost as well as an impact upon the resident or other party involved.

That pattern makes the issue relevant to "Putting Residents First" in two different ways. The person affected may first experience the defective service, delay, maladministration or disputed decision; if compensation subsequently becomes payable, Harrow residents collectively bear the financial consequence through public funds. The protected-tree case is particularly useful in illustrating the governance question because the issue extends beyond whether the original decision could lawfully be made. A £30,000 payment should reasonably prompt questions about the quality of the evidence and professional advice available when the decision was taken, how legal and financial risk was assessed, whether the matter was reviewed as that risk developed and what organisational learning followed. Similar questions arise when Ombudsman findings identify maladministration: the important issue for residents is not simply that an individual remedy has eventually been provided, but whether the underlying weakness has been identified and corrected.

This is where accountability becomes central to the slogan. Following an adverse finding, Harrow should be able, where appropriate, to establish what failed, where responsibility rested, whether those exercising authority knew or should reasonably have known of the risk, what action and escalation followed, and how corrective action was verified. Complaints, Ombudsman findings and compensation are therefore more than individual cases: collectively they can identify patterns, weaknesses in supervision or decision-making and risks affecting residents beyond the original complainant.

No compensation payment by itself proves poor governance, and no large public authority can avoid every unsuccessful decision or service failure. The relevant test is what Harrow does after evidence shows that something has gone wrong. If adverse findings are analysed collectively, reported transparently and used to change practice, they become valuable sources of corporate assurance. If they are treated mainly as separate cases to be defended, remedied, paid and closed, organisational learning is lost. For residents, "Putting Residents First" should mean not only receiving a remedy but having confidence that the council learns sufficiently to reduce the likelihood of recurrence.

10. Public money and decisions made in residents' names

The administration's commitment also needs to be tested against significant discretionary decisions made in residents' names. Harrow joined other Conservative-held London councils in the unsuccessful 2023 High Court challenge concerning the Mayor of London's expansion of ULEZ. Whatever political position is taken on ULEZ, the decision to commit public resources to litigation required proper consideration of legal prospects, potential costs, relevant environmental and public-health evidence, alternative uses of public money and the value that the action could realistically deliver for Harrow residents.

This illustrates an important distinction between political representation and evidence-based stewardship. An administration is entitled to pursue its political programme, but a policy being popular with some residents does not remove the obligation to scrutinise evidence, risk and value for money. "Putting Residents First" cannot simply mean pursuing what political leaders believe some residents want; it should also mean demonstrating that significant decisions made on residents' behalf have been subjected to balanced analysis and appropriate challenge. This becomes especially important when the consequences of an unsuccessful decision are borne not by the decision-makers personally but through public resources.

11. From process assurance to resident assurance

The issues considered in this review ultimately lead to a question of corporate assurance. Conventional assurance asks whether policies exist, statutory duties have been met, risks recorded, procedures followed and performance monitored. A resident-first authority must add a further test: what happened to the person at the end of the system? Did consultation enable meaningful participation? Could the resident access and understand the service? Was correspondence substantively answered? Did a complaint reveal and correct a wider weakness? These questions move assurance from evidence that processes operated towards evidence that they achieved their intended public purpose.

Resident assurance would strengthen rather than weaken professional and statutory standards. Harrow should be able to demonstrate not merely that it consulted, communicated or responded, but what consultation changed, whether communication was understood and whether the response addressed the substance of the issue. Adding resident outcomes to procedural assurance provides a more demanding and more relevant measure of whether "Putting Residents First" is being delivered.

Conclusion

The evidence considered in this review does not justify saying that Harrow Council never puts residents first. There are examples of improved access, consultation activity and positive resident perceptions. The more significant finding is that the evidence is uneven. A slogan expressed as "Putting Residents First" makes a broad promise, while Harrow's experience raises the possibility that some residents encounter a very different relationship with the authority. The appropriate test is therefore whether all residents have a reasonable opportunity to experience that commitment, particularly when their needs are complex, their access requirements differ or what they have to say is difficult for the council to hear.

Across the areas examined, a consistent distinction emerges between the existence of a process and the experience it produces. Planning and waste consultations test whether formal participation is meaningful; Ofsted, CYADS and SEND test whether improvement structures translate into better experiences for children and families; CQC findings show how established adult social-care systems can coexist with difficulties around access, information and timeliness; and engagement and public communication demonstrate why publishing, acknowledging and responding cannot automatically be equated with informing, listening and answering. Together, these examples raise the question of whether procedural assurance sometimes carries greater organisational weight than resident assurance.

The same test applies when things go wrong. Compensation, Ombudsman findings and other adverse outcomes should not automatically be treated as evidence of one systemic failure, but they should enable Harrow to establish what failed, whether it could have been prevented, where responsibility rested and what changed afterwards. Elected members, particularly those exercising executive responsibility, and senior officers should be able to demonstrate how decisions, services and public resources are producing effective resident outcomes. Constructive external scrutiny should form part of that assurance: the meaningful test is not whether legitimate questions were administratively processed, but whether their substance was heard, considered and answered.

Ultimately, the credibility of "Putting Residents First" cannot be established by repetition of the slogan. It has to be demonstrated where residents actually encounter Harrow Council: when they participate in consultation, seek support, navigate SEND or social care, question expenditure, complain about failure or seek an answer from those exercising authority. The evidence suggests that Harrow can demonstrate residents being put first in some circumstances, but raises a harder question about whether that promise extends consistently to all. Compliance can demonstrate that Harrow did what it was required to do; "Putting Residents First" requires the council to demonstrate what difference doing it made for the resident. If that cannot be shown consistently, the slogan risks presenting an image of universal care and concern that is more even than the reality experienced by some residents.

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About this publication

This independent research paper was prepared by Husain Akhtar for Harrow Monitoring Group. It reviews Harrow Council's public-facing commitment to "Putting Residents First", examining how that aspiration is reflected in practice. The review draws principally upon documentary evidence, official records, regulatory and inspection findings, council publications and other published evidence.

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