

**MINUTES OF THE PERFORMANCE AND FINANCE SELECT COMMITTEE**  
**Tuesday, 16<sup>th</sup> November 2004 at 7.30 pm**

PRESENT: Councillor J Long (Chair), Councillor H B Patel (Vice-Chair) and Councillors Gladbaum, Moher and Rands (alternate for Gillani).

Also present were Councillors Coughlin and John (part).

An apology for absence was received from Councillor Gillani.

**1. Declarations of Personal and Prejudicial Interests**

There were none.

**2. Deputations**

There were none

**3. Minutes of the Previous Meeting – 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2004**

RESOLVED:-

that the minutes of the previous meeting held on 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2004 be received and approved as an accurate record.

**4. Matters Arising**

There were none.

**5. Annual Complaints Report 2003/04**

The Lead Member for Corporate Resources and Susan Riddle (Complaints Investigations Officer) were present at the meeting for this item.

Susan Riddle (Complaints Investigations Officer) outlined the key issues contained in the fifth annual report on the operation of the Council's complaints procedure. Members noted that this report provided information about complaints made to the Local Government Ombudsman, the operation of the Council's own complaints procedure, the payment of compensation, key developments in complaints handling in 2003/4 and targets for 2004/2005. Members noted that in 2003 Brent experienced its third year in which no reports had been issued against the Council. Members noted that in the 2003/2004 period 100 complaints had been made against the Council and that the figures for the current year looked equally encouraging. Susan Riddle confirmed that a quarter of complaints fell outside the jurisdiction of the Council and that only ten local settlements had been made by the authority.

In response to questions Susan Riddle explained that whilst some areas were still failing to respond to complaints within the allocated timescales, this issue was being addressed. The Lead Member for Corporate Resources referred to revenue and benefits handling and confirmed that some delays had been experienced in this area as a result of workload pressures but that great efforts were being made to improve the response times. Councillor Gladbaum welcomed the introduction of the Children and Young People's complaints procedure and acknowledged the work that had been done by Angela Hickey who had recently left the Council. In response to a question from Councillor H B Patel concerning the nature of complaints received against the Council, Susan Riddle explained that a third of these were related to housing, a third concerned revenue and benefits issues whilst the remaining third covered a variety of issues. Members noted that issues of complaint were wide ranging and included repairs issues, lack of housing and homelessness assessments. Susan Riddle confirmed that she would circulate information to Members regarding the particular types of complaints that were received against the Council.

In response to questions from Councillors H B Patel and Moher concerning the handling process for complaints, Susan Riddle explained that stage 1 complaints were generally resolved at the local level by managers; stage 2 complaints were dealt with on a more remote handling basis whilst stage 3 complaints were resolved independently by the Corporate Complaints Team. Members noted that stage 3 complaints generally took longer to resolve as they were often complex investigations. At this point the Chair queried whether the effective handling of Stage 2 complaints depended on more suitable staff training. Responding to a query from the Chair, Susan Riddle confirmed that thorough training provision was offered to managers to enable them to respond effectively to Stage 1 and 2 complaints but that workload issues in some service areas such as housing was leading to longer response times.

In response to comments from Councillor Rands concerning the use of questionnaires to determine public satisfaction with the complaints process, Susan Riddle explained that a pilot was underway in the Housing Department in which questionnaires were sent to all stage 1 complainants. Members noted that if the pilot was successful this could be rolled out to all stage 1 complainants and possibly Stage 2 complainants across the service areas, if successful.

Commenting on complaints against Social Services the Director of Social Services confirmed that there were not enough Stage 1 complaints. Members were advised that there appeared to be a problem with how to accurately record complaints within the service area as under-counting and a failure to record complaints had been experienced. Members were advised that training had recently been

provided to all managers in order to alert them to the complaints issue. It was acknowledged how important it was that the public be educated about reporting complaints. Susan Riddle confirmed that training would be given to outreach organisations and agencies to inform them about the complaints procedure so that this information could then be passed on to local residents. The Director confirmed that some service users feared the loss of services and care provision and therefore tended not to report complaints. Whilst acknowledging that the escalation figures were better for the service area, it was stressed that such figures should be improved.

RESOLVED:-

that the report be noted.

#### **6. BVPI Satisfaction Survey 2006 (Future Publicity and Promotion)**

Toni McConville (Director, Communications and Consultation) circulated a summary sheet to all those present detailing regular communications with local residents and stakeholders. Members were advised that in the last satisfaction survey which was undertaken between October 2003 and January 2004, 55% of residents said they felt the Council communicated well with local residents. Whilst this figure was encouraging it was acknowledged that the figure could be improved. Members were advised that the Brent Magazine was the flagship route for promoting Council services to local residents but that there was now a range of means for promoting Council services including the Annual Review (September 2004), Ward Working letters, regular updates in the Brent Magazine and the website, which was becoming an increasingly critical communications vehicle for the Council. In response to a question from Councillor Rands, Phil Newby (Director, Policy & Regeneration Unit) explained that a cross-party information newsletter would be produced regarding ward working.

Councillor Rands then referred to the BVPI Satisfaction Survey and expressed some concerns that publicity would be targeted towards improving the Council's position with residents who had not necessarily experienced particular Council services. The Lead Member for Corporate Resources explained that some responses were based on perception rather than experience of Council services and that this issue had to be taken into consideration. Cathy Tyson (Policy and Regeneration Unit) explained that the format of the survey was determined by the ODPM and that local authorities had to comply with the methodology. Whilst it was acknowledged that the self-selecting survey was notably unreliable, the last survey had highlighted the need to inform local residents about Council services across the Borough.

Councillor Moher stressed the need for good publicity and promotion regarding Council services, such as at Area and SUCF forums. Members noted that Brent's cultural diversity and high levels of

transience meant that it was often harder to gain consensus on service delivery. However, Members were advised that Brent was successful in its promotion of services to local residents. At this point Councillor Rands suggested that information should be fed back to the ODPM in time for the 2006 BVPI Satisfaction Survey to ensure that a more accurate survey could be undertaken.

RESOLVED:-

that the update be noted.

## 7. **Social Services Funding Report**

Members noted that the report before them outlined the position of the Social Services Department revenue budget as at the end of September 2004, reviewed where it was to date and highlighted particular pressures on the budget such as client numbers and the cost implications for the Council. Members were advised that a substantial contingency to meet unforeseen pressures during the financial year was now being used by the Department to address the issue of an anticipated overspend of £355,000 at the end of the financial year.

Referring to implementation of the Children Bill and the financial implications of the reorganisation, the Director confirmed that action plans were in place to ensure that funds were suitably identified to meet the costs of implementation. Members were advised that guidance was awaited from the DfES about what grants would be available to meet the costs of the new Children's Service. Referring to the £401,000 variance identified in the report, the Director confirmed that a new financial management system had been introduced and that substantial savings within finance support services had been anticipated. However, these savings were overly ambitious and a substantial reduction of staffing had not been possible. Consequently there was a £401,000 variance within the Department. Regarding the cost implications of the pressures that had been experienced by the Department, namely the responsibilities of meeting client costs between the PCT and the Council, the Director of Social Services advised those present that the cost implications were now far greater for the local authority and this had affected the budget in the last financial year. Members were advised that there had been no changes to eligibility criteria.

Following a query from the Chair concerning pooled budgets, the Director of Social Services explained that these could be used for a variety of things but such agreements would not be entered into if it was felt that they presented any financial risk to the Department. In response to a further question from the Chair concerning the current status of Carlyon Print, the Director explained that there had been continuing improvements and discussions had been undertaken with

Sure Trust and subsequent proposals would be presented to the Executive in the near future regarding future management.

RESOLVED:-

that the report be noted.

#### **8. Update of the Current Performance within the Benefits Service**

Jenny Dunne (Housing Benefit Manager) advised Members of the Select Committee that the report before them provided an update on the performance to date within the Benefits Service following a progress report to the Select Committee in April 2004. Jenny Dunne outlined the main details of the report including improved performance outcomes, stability regarding workload management and an improved CPA rating. Referring specifically to workload management, Jenny Dunne advised those present that this had stabilised since April 2004 and that the majority of outstanding work had been received in the last month.

Commenting on the Best Value Performance Indicators, Jenny Dunne advised those present that improvements were expected for the changes in circumstances BVPI in quarter 3. Ms Dunne then went on to comment on the accuracy of data input to ensure that performance was being reported accurately. Whilst the accuracy of payment of housing benefit had been improving it was noted that such improvements had been made from a higher base. Commenting on the satisfaction survey, Members were advised that the overall results were encouraging. With regard to overpayment of housing benefit, Members were advised that recovery of overpayments had improved and was expected to achieve its target. Members were advised that it was anticipated that the Department would achieve its financial targets for overpayment recovery.

Commenting on complaints, Jenny Dunne advised Members that a number of improvements had been made since last year and that the public's perception of the Council was now more positive, as highlighted in the satisfaction survey. Members noted that staff in the Housing Benefits Service Team were working closely with the Complaints Team to ensure that the process of identifying and managing complaints was improved. Jenny Dunne confirmed that the new corporate complaints system would enable better recording of information and better analyses of the reasons for complaints. Referring to the report, Jenny Dunne highlighted some of the significant improvements that had been made within the service, as reflected in the comprehensive performance assessment (CPA) results. Members were advised that this would remain a priority issue for the forthcoming year. Whilst acknowledging that improvements had been made the emphasis would be on maintaining and improving these services further. At this point the Lead Member for Corporate Resources

praised the Housing Benefits Team for the work that had been successfully undertaken despite some earlier problems affecting the delivery of service. Members were advised that the CPA result would reflect the work that had been achieved. Councillors Gladbaum, Rands and H B Patel commented on the improvements that had been made within the service but stressed the need to maintain such improvements.

Commenting on customer services' performance, Councillor H B Patel expressed some concerns that people were only seen for approximately two minutes regarding revenue and benefits' enquiries. Jenny Dunne explained that this was an average and that some enquiries were particularly complex and therefore these would be dealt with over a longer period. Margaret Read confirmed that approximately 15 minutes were allocated on average per query although this was not always necessary. Jenny Dunne explained that a pilot was underway regarding the handling of initial enquiries at the reception area within one stop shops, ensuring that queries were managed more effectively and resolved at the first point of contact whenever possible.

Referring to local authority errors Margaret Read confirmed that staff training and improved quality controls should minimise such errors and that managers were aware of the need to monitor the situation. It was noted that a predominant cause of local authority error was generated by private sector rent cases due to the high number of private sector tenants in the Borough who were also more likely to be transient.

In response to a query from the Chair concerning the recruitment of a further 20 DWP funded trainees, Margaret Read explained that the trainee positions would be funded by the DWP for one year but that thereafter these costs would have to be met by the Council. Members were advised that training for the DWP positions would be vital in the next financial year but that as no funding would be available from the DWP this would obviously affect the Department's budget and an overspend was likely. It was important to note however that the Authority would, as a result of these positions, not be paying for temporary staff and it would benefit in the long term from a permanent team of skilled staff. Members were advised that of a £9m budget, approximately £3m of this was allocated for capita whilst the balance of £6m was allocated to the Benefits Service and support functions. Members were advised that no overspend was projected for the current year. Whilst commenting on staff turnover and recruitment issues in London, Members were advised that there had previously been a gap in the skills set. At this point the Chair stressed the need to ensure that the situation was constantly monitored and reviewed.

RESOLVED:-

that progress within the Benefit Service since April 2004 and of future plans for the service be noted.

## 9. **Parking Account**

Irfan Malik (Assistant Director of Environment) outlined a report before Members which provided an explanation for the reduction in the amount of parking income collected and the reduction in associated Penalty Charge Notices across the Borough. The report also detailed the actions that were being taken to remedy the situation. Members were advised that the report highlighted how Brent was slightly under-achieving in terms of its parking income collection and that there had been notable problems due to the vandalism of Pay and Display meters and theft of monies from such meters which has resulted in an approximate £300,000 shortfall in the budget. At this point Members were advised that it was anticipated that Brent would over-achieve on its targets for parking permits.

Irfan Malik advised Members that problems had been experienced over the last six months in Brent and other authorities such as Westminster and Wandsworth with regard to meters being vandalised and/or monies stolen. Members noted that it was felt that there was an organised crime aspect to the current problems across London. Members noted that the cost implications of this for the Borough meant that there had been a significant reduction in 'Pay and Display' meter income. The situation peaked in April 2004 but since this time a number of measures had been undertaken to try and improve the situation, although it was acknowledged that the Department would be down on the year financially. Irfan Malik stressed the need to ensure that meters were in place so that tickets could be issued and income recovered by the authority. He stressed that action had been taken and that there was a great deal of support from the Police to address the current problems. With regard to cash collection, this service had been improved with additional collections during the day. In addition, better locking systems and more robust locks were used on the meters. At this point Irfan Malik explained that rather than simply meeting the costs of replacing and fixing damaged 'Pay and Display' meters, the Authority was considering other options such as the sale of parking tickets in local shops. It was noted that the service level agreement between the Council and the parking meter repairers had been re-negotiated in order to ensure that the repairs were done quicker. It was noted that slight improvements in collection figures had been apparent since July 2004 but that these figures should improve further.

Members were advised that bus lane enforcement had been introduced across the Borough in December 2003. New facilities had recently been provided and four people were now employed to monitor the cameras throughout the week and at weekends. Members were advised that the Department would now talk to TfL to try and increase the number of roads on which cameras were located.

Referring to PCN (non bus lane) Members were advised that figures were slowly increasing and it was anticipated that this would continue. Members were advised that there had been improvements to the computerised systems and that as a result there was now better coverage and flexibility.

At this point the Chair queried the viability of replacing vandalised parking meters with solar powered meters. Irfan Malik advised those present that meter capacity was reduced in winter months and that solar powered meters did not therefore present the Authority with the best option as they would not cope with the volume of usage in busy shopping areas and there were problems regarding capacity, especially in the winter. Councillor Rands enquired about the pattern of vandalism to parking meters across the Borough and enquired as to which areas of Brent were being targeted the most. Irfan Malik confirmed that Willesden and some parts of Kilburn were the most affected areas with problems generally located in shopping areas. Consequently it was felt that one option would be to locate meters in local shops for shop-keepers to sell parking tickets. In response to a query from Councillor Rands concerning the financial shortfall, Irfan Malik confirmed that the majority of the financial losses were as a result of vandalism and/or theft, especially from those meters positioned in busy shopping areas. Referring to the £300,000 losses affecting the service, Irfan Malik acknowledged that the 2004/05 projections may have been set too high but that the damage to parking meters had impacted significantly on the Department's revenue.

With regards to what action was being taken to address declining PCNs, Members were advised that the current software had reached its maximum capacity for processing tickets. However, the IT Department had now successfully created new space on the system by compressing data and the processing of PCNs was now being managed effectively.

Councillor Gladbaum enquired as to how many incidents of vandalism had been reported in recent months. Irfan Malik confirmed that all cases of vandalism and/or theft were reported to both the contractor and the police. He confirmed that figures relating to these issues would be circulated separately to Members for information. In response to a query regarding prosecutions, Irfan Malik confirmed that there had been none in Brent.

In response to a further question regarding the viability of using solar panel meters, Irfan Malik stressed that this option was problematic due to the issue of capacity. Irfan Malik acknowledged that some local authorities were piloting the use of solar power meters so he would be able to assess how successful they were in other areas. He stressed however that he felt that a voucher scheme would be a more suitable option. Members noted that the Department was currently trying to prioritise where and when meters would be replaced. With regard to



the introduction of a voucher scheme, Members noted that a Traffic Order would have to be sought but that this could be quite a timely process. Consequently, a range of options would be considered by the Department.

At this point the Lead Member for Corporate Resources stressed the need to ensure that parking meter machines were operational wherever possible and referred to machines not having been switched on in Nichol Road. Irfan Malik confirmed that he would clarify the matter. Councillor H B Patel then enquired about action that was being taken to address the problem of potential organised crime both within Brent and across other authorities. Irfan Malik explained that local authorities were responding to the situation in partnership with one another and the police and in certain areas such as Westminster, a number of individuals had been prosecuted. With regard to the issue of bus lane enforcement, Irfan Malik explained that bus lanes were planned for Ealing, Sudbury and Colindale although there were currently no plans to have such lanes in Harlesden High Road. Councillor Rands stressed the need to ensure that enforcement areas were not too close to junctions which could lead to people being caught out as they manoeuvred in and out of roads and streets. Irfan Malik acknowledged that people should not be penalised for clipping the bus lanes and that only real abuses of the lanes should be enacted upon.

Councillor H B Patel highlighted the problem of tickets being issued even when meters were not working and queried what action was being taken to address this issue. Irfan Malik acknowledged the problem but stressed that the issuing of tickets when meters were out of action was wrong and that staff should not issue tickets in this situation. He stressed however that a ticket had to be served once it had started to be written out. Acknowledging the problem he stressed however that these issues needed to be flagged up and raised with managers and staff to ensure that such issues were not an ongoing issue.

At this point the Chair requested a future update on the proposed introduction of a voucher scheme. Members of the Select Committee extended their thanks to Irfan Malik for his attendance at the meeting.

**RESOLVED:-**

- (i) that the update be noted; and
- (ii) that the Performance and Finance Select Committee receive a future update about the proposed introduction of a parking voucher scheme.

**10. 2004/05 Capital Programme Budget Monitoring Report**

Duncan McLeod (Director of Finance) outlined the report before Members which provided details about the latest position on the 2004/2005 Capital Programme, the estimated resources and agreed total budgets against the latest projected outturn.

Members of the Select Committee were advised that this report had been presented to the Executive on the 15<sup>th</sup> November 2004, with the recommendations as outlined in the report having been agreed by the Executive at this meeting. Members were asked to note the main variations to the budget that had occurred since the July report to the Executive, taking into account a number of risk areas. These included an amendment by the Executive to the EAL Programme, slippage of £300,000 for the Preston Park Junior School Hut Replacement Scheme, slippage of £150,000 for the Brent House One Stop Shop Refurbishment Project as well as an additional budget requirement of £424,000 to ensure necessary asbestos work be undertaken by the Authority. Commenting on the overall position, Members were advised that the latest projected outturn on the programme showed a small surplus position of approximately £330,000. Members noted that this surplus was due to good planning and management of the overall capital budget programme.

Councillor Gladbaum referred to the report and asked that references to a reduction in the level of exports to specialist schools out of the Borough be re-worded with more suitable terminology.

RESOLVED:-

that the Performance and Finance Select Committee notes the decisions taken by the Executive regarding the revised budget in respect of the 2004/05 programme, as per the recommendations detailed in the report.

**11. Onyx Task Group Update**

The Chair advised Members of the Select Committee that the work of the task group had been progressing slowly. However, two site visits had been undertaken in Stonebridge and Harlesden and meetings were scheduled to take place in the near future with both StreetCare and Onyx. Members were advised that the final report of the Onyx Task Group was anticipated in January 2005.

**12. Items requested onto the Scrutiny Agenda**

At its meeting on 26<sup>th</sup> October 2004, the Forward Plan Select Committee requested that the Annual BHP Report be placed on the 2004/05 Work Programme for future consideration by the Select Committee. Members noted that this request would be considered by the Management Board at its meeting which was scheduled to take

place on 1<sup>st</sup> December 2004 and added to the Performance and Finance Select Committee's work programme if appropriate.

RESOLVED:-

that the Performance and Finance Select Committee be advised of the Management Board's decision regarding a request that the BHP Annual Report be added to the Select Committee's work programme.

**13. Recommendations from the Executive for Items to be Considered by the Performance and Finance Select Committee**

There were none.

**14. Any Other Urgent Business**

There was none.

The meeting ended at 10.05 pm

J LONG  
Chair

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