



## **MINUTES OF THE PARTNERSHIP AND PLACE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**Thursday 20 March 2014 at 7.00 pm**

PRESENT: Councillor Van Kalwala (Chair) and Councillors Arnold, Harrison, HB Patel, RS Patel and Krupa Sheth

Also present: Councillors Hunter and John

Apologies for absence were received from: Councillor Cheese

### **1. Declarations of personal and prejudicial interests**

None declared.

### **1. Deputations**

None.

### **2. Minutes of the previous meeting**

RESOLVED:

that the minutes of the meeting held on 21 January 2014 be approved as an accurate record of the meeting.

### **3. Matters arising**

Information was sought on what action the Council was taking to encourage accreditation of professional qualifications obtained in foreign countries.

### **4. Brent Council's new Apprenticeship Programme**

Cara Davani, Operational Director, Human Resources introduced the report before the committee. She pointed out that the new apprenticeship programme was an ambitious three year programme with a target of employing 100 apprentices. This would be made up by employing 35 apprentices in years one and two and 30 in year three. So far good progress had been made with 21 employed, most of which were young people living in the borough. There were a diverse range of opportunities open to them across all departments of the Council and within Brent Housing Partnership. She outlined the main features of the programme detailed in paragraph 4.4 of the report.

In answer to questions from members of the committee, Cara Davani explained that the biggest recruitment drive would take place during June and July to attract school leavers. HR was working closely with the Employment and Enterprise scheme given its wider involvement in apprenticeship opportunities within the

borough. The apprentices were offered career advice and guidance on career paths both generally as a group and individually. She explained that existing vacancies had been identified where the funding could be used to support a placement and there was a broad range of placements offered across the council. The usual advertising outlets including local press, web site, job centres and posters had been used to attract candidates and the programme aimed to retain a certain number at the end of their term. The level of external funding to support the qualificatory training associated with the programme depended on age with 16-18 year olds attracting the highest levels of funding but with apprentices being taken on up to the age of 24. Cara Davani confirmed that work with the Children and Families Department had been undertaken to identify those looked after children looking for job opportunities who could be targeted for the programme. In answer to further questioning, Cara Davani stated that the great majority of the 21 apprentices so far taken on lived in Brent and undertook to provide members of the committee with a breakdown of where they were from by post code/ward and how this related to the advertising carried out. She added that Brent Housing Partnership had bid for seven placements and currently had two.

Members questioned the salary level paid to the apprentices and how this related to the commitment by the Council to pay the London Living Wage to all its employees. Cara Davani explained that the salary costs were met by the Council and that there were separate salary expectations for apprentices which excluded them from being paid an amount equal to the living wage but that it should be remembered that apprentices benefitted from paid time off to attend training and their qualifications were fully funded. The Chair requested that further financial information be provided to members of the committee on the salary arrangements.

The Committee thanked Cara Davani for her attendance.

#### **5. Brent Housing Partnership (BHP) performance update**

Peta Caine, the newly appointed Director of Operations at Brent Housing Partnership (BHP) was present for this item. She stated that she was open to answering questions about the performance of Brent Housing Partnership and was interested to hear from members on how they might wish to be presented with performance information in the future.

In answer to the comment that there appeared to be more areas where performance was down than there were where performance was up, Peta Caine explained that a lot of the downward performance was around correspondence and complaints handling. She stated that changes implemented the previous Autumn and further changes made since had increased the focus placed on customer service and front line delivery. It was commented that whilst it was good to have information on telephone handling, performance was poor. Peta Caine explained that BHP had experienced the same difficulties with using the mobile telephone technology that the Council had and work was underway to deal with this. Addressing the issue of the quality of the response, she stated that the complaints team needed better support from the wider organisation. A proposed new structure was out for consultation with an implementation date of July/August 2014. Regarding a comment made about providing more comprehensive information to leaseholders, she explained that the planned maintenance programme would soon be out for consultation and this would include leaseholders as well as ensuring

there was a greater level of engagement with them. She confirmed that leaseholders received the BHP newsletter. In addressing the problems of performance with the call centre, Peta Caine stated that improved information was needed on the telephone numbers residents should use so that calls could be handled more efficiently. Consideration was being given to the level of resources available and the systems in place that would allow a service to be provided whereby people did not have the need to telephone. However, the Chair pointed out that BHP was not a new organisation and was surprised that it did not seem to have in place mechanisms to meet exceptional demand. Peta Caine explained that in the past extra staff had been recruited to cover the winter peak periods and this had masked the underlying issues. The decision had been taken not to do this during the current year but this had coincided with the exceptionally wet weather. An exercise was being undertaken to map periods of higher demand and to match this with appropriate staff resources.

The comment was made that future reports could contain a covering report drawing out the main issues.

Addressing the issue of the removal of rubbish, Peta Caine explained that BHP had a contract with Wettons for internal cleaning and bought into the Council's contract with Veolia for rubbish removal. Work was underway to better integrate these services. A recent talkback session called 'Love where you live' had taken place concentrating on what happened outside a person's front door and involving all the agencies responsible for delivering the services. More regular inspections took place in higher rise blocks than in lower rise blocks essentially because of health and safety considerations. The Committee identified the fall in performance of internal cleaning and asked why this had happened. Peta Caine explained that it had been found that the sample size used was too unrepresentative to draw meaningful comparisons and so BHP was undertaking a thorough review of this in order to get a more robust method of sampling. The performance of the contractor and the contract monitoring arrangements were also under review.

The Chair asked what benchmarking information might be usefully used and Peta Caine acknowledged that information from HouseMark could be used in reports to future meetings. In the meantime she undertook to provide the comparison with 2013 data which had already been considered by the BHP board. She was also asked to provide more detail on re-letting rates and timescales.

Peta Caine was thanked for her attendance.

## **6. Registered Social Landlords update**

Tony Hirsch, Policy and Performance Officer in the Regeneration and Growth Department, presented a PowerPoint presentation called 'Partnership with Registered Providers' which outlined the present position, the direction of travel and what was needed for the future. He outlined the background to the Council's housing strategy with reference to population growth, birth rate, household size and demand. Linked to this were the economic conditions within the borough, the supply of social rented housing and the impact of the welfare reforms on the levels of homelessness. He explained that the challenges for the Housing Strategy was the rising population not being matched by the provision of housing, the growth in the private rented sector that now accounted for one third of the local market, rising

house prices, rents at unaffordable levels for those on average or below average incomes, poverty and welfare reforms. The Housing Strategy was due to be submitted to the Executive in June 2014 along with the Employment Strategy and Tony Hirsch invited views from the committee.

It was submitted that if housing associations were working with the Council to secure contracts and the Council procured services properly why a better service was not obtained. Tony Hirsch explained that funding was held by the Mayor of London and there was currently legal action being taken by councils over his approach to setting rent levels. The outcome of this would influence the Council's control over the provision of housing in the borough. In answer to a further question, he also explained that overcrowding had become a serious problem with the result that if a household was overcrowded by only one bedroom they got no priority for a transfer. The committee asked for data on the numbers of such households.

Addressing the issue of demand, Tony Hirsch stated that there was still a plentiful supply of developable land in Brent but there would come a point in the next 20/30 years when London would not be able to meet demand. Any extra provision would be welcomed but he warned that relaxing planning controls risked the quality of what was provided. One possible source of supply was the use of retail space. It was felt that some existing high streets were not sustainable in their present size and therefore afforded the potential for providing housing by conversion of shop premises. He added that there would also be additional tall buildings developed to meet demand subject to assurances that they could be properly maintained and managed.

The point was made that the provision of adequate housing was linked to work around health and wellbeing. This included the provision of proper family planning advice so that every child born was a wanted child and family size was sustainable.

Tony Hirsch undertook to provide information to members on the Council's plans for regenerating existing housing estates and what funding models might be used in the future. He explained that the Mayor of London had a fixed pot of money to allocate across London to meet need beyond what local councils could deliver. The hope for increasing borrowing capacity to generate funds had not materialised from the recent Government Budget.

A report on private rented sector licensing was due to go to the Executive in April and would reveal more information around how the welfare reforms had influenced the supply of private rented property. Work around this was being co-ordinated with work being carried out by Brent Housing Partnership.

Tony Hirsch was thanked for his attendance.

## **7. Tackling violence against women and girls in Brent**

Councillor John introduced the report of the task group and acknowledged the presence at the meeting of two other members of the task group; Councillors Harrison and Hunter. She explained that she had presented the report to all the relevant bodies of the Council to ensure it attracted the attention and action the subjects needed. She outlined the three harmful practices the report covered: Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), Forced Marriage (FM) and Honour Based

Violence (HBV). She was pleased to see that large scale publicity was being given to the issues covered in the report and so saw a chance to make a real difference for the good. She drew a link to the earlier item on the supply of housing and how some of the communities in which the practices occurred lived in social housing. Councillor John related her experience of meeting two women who had been subject to forced and abusive marriages and explained that the report was being put before the committee to ensure the issues featured in any future work it carried out.

It was submitted that there was an important link between the report and that of the children safeguarding board task group. Councillor John acknowledged this and confirmed that the recommendations of both were complementary. The point was also made that the issues needed to be raised in schools and Councillor Harrison reported that the Children and Young Persons Overview and Scrutiny Committee had, the previous evening, agreed to pursue this. Additionally, it was agreed that the report should be put before the joint Brent ALMO housing forum for discussion.

Members of the committee welcomed the report and acknowledged the excellent work of the task group. It was noted that there was still a lack of adequate data collected and efficiently shared on the carrying out of the three harmful practices and the impact they had on women and girls.

**8. Date of next meeting**

It was noted that the date of the next meeting would be subject to the outcome of the Council's agreed annual programme of meetings for 2014/15.

**9. Any other urgent business**

None.

**10. Vote of thanks**

The Chair referred to this being the last meeting of the committee in 2013/14 and thanked everyone for their contributions throughout the year. In return members of the committee thanked the Chair for his work.

The meeting closed at 9.45 pm

Z VAN KALWALA  
Chair