



**MINUTES OF THE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**  
**Wednesday 11 March 2015 at 7.00 pm**

PRESENT: Councillor A Choudry (Chair), Councillor Colwill (Vice-Chair) and Councillors Allie, J Mitchell Murray, W Mitchell Murray, Shahzad and Southwood, together with Mr Alloysius Frederick and Dr J Levison, and appointed observer, Lesley Gouldbourne

Also Present: Councillors S Choudhary, Collier, Filson and McLennan (Lead Member for Regeneration and Housing)

Apologies were received from: Councillors Oladapo, Co-opted Member Ms Christine Cargill and appointed observers

**1. Declarations of interests**

None declared at this stage of the meeting.

**2. Minutes of the previous meeting held on 10 February 2015**

RESOLVED:

that the minutes of the previous meeting held on 10 February 2015 be approved as an accurate record of the meeting.

**3. Matters arising**

None.

**4. Update on Community Access Strategy**

Margaret Read (Operational Director - Brent Customer Services, Regeneration and Growth) introduced the report and advised members that the Community Access Strategy had been agreed at Cabinet on 15 October 2014. She stated that the strategy recognised the significant challenges, including financial, that the council faced and it was not feasible for services to continue to be provided in the way they currently were. Members heard that the strategy focused on accessing services in different ways, such as increasing access through digital channels, whilst freeing up resources to target customers who needed a more personalised approach. Margaret Read then drew members' attention to the key principles underpinning the delivery of the Customer Access Strategy that supported the wider aims of the Brent Borough Plan, corporate strategic objectives and the Community Access Strategy.

Margaret Read informed the committee that the Community Access Strategy would be achieved through a programme of projects that were overseen by the One Council Board, with the four working streams in progress being:

- Improving telephony to ensure residents experience a consistently good response
- Channel shift – improving the digital offer to residents so that where they can self serve, it is easy and convenient to do so
- Modernising face to face contact to support changing access arrangements, in particular providing assistance to residents who may need help to self serve
- Thematic reviews – to redesign the way in which services, working with partners and the Voluntary and Community Sector and joining up service delivery so that individual and community needs are better met.

Margaret Read then provided members of an update on achievements and progress with each of the four working streams to date and in respect of channel shift, she advised that a new Customer Portal was due to go live in July 2015 that would include an increased number of services offered through this channel. She stated that it was recognised that some service areas needed to improve and it was important that services were joined up in a way that made sense to residents.

During members' discussions, the multicultural nature of the borough was highlighted and it was enquired whether this had been taken into account, particularly as English was not the first language for a number of residents. It was asked whether lessons had been learnt from previous changes to services, such as parking and what was the level of savings expected from delivering the strategy. A member commented that many residents had no access to a computer and preferred to use the telephone, however he asked what steps were being taken to prevent customers being misdirected to the wrong department. Another member commented on the importance of communicating to residents that services could be accessed in a number of different ways and enquired whether residents were advised about things such as creating and changing sound passwords and was their data protected. In addition, another member asked if the new Customer Portal offered a facility to create a new password when the current one had been forgotten. It was asked whether help and advice was available to older people to help them access and use services digitally.

A member enquired whether the new Customer Portal would be tested with a variety of residents, including those with disabilities, prior to its launch. Another member asked whether the testing would be undertaken borough wide. She commented that the triage system had worked well to date and asked whether there was training for staff in dealing with particularly complex issues. She also asked what would be ideal way in which residents would describe the service they had experienced as far as the council was concerned.

A member sought further information on what service areas had been underperforming and how was misdirecting of calls by the switchboard being monitored or picked up. In terms of calls reported as misdirected, he asked if this was formally recorded. He commented whether there a danger of making the council too remote from the community by shifting access via IT and telephony channels and removing opportunities for direct contact with residents. Another

member enquired how customer and staff feedback was followed up and she suggested that the committee receive an annual report on customer feedback and information on dropped and missed calls, as well as information on how the triage service was performing. A member asked what was the target for answering calls and also how long was information on customers kept and was it sold to external organisations. Another member stated that it was important to remove jargon to make it easier for residents to understand what was being offered and that there should also be consistency of language. It was also suggested that there needed to be better signage from the Civic Centre car park to the reception area.

With the approval of the Chair, Councillor S Choudhary addressed the committee. Councillor S Choudhary remarked that around 20% to 30% of telephone calls were dealt with by Serco on behalf of the council and that it was frustrating that the council was being blamed for misdirected or dropped calls when it was not necessarily handling them. The Chair also invited Councillor Collier to address the committee. Councillor Collier asked if there was information available on the increase in traffic to the council's website, the percentage of dropped calls and the average length of time before the call was dropped and how this compared with other local authorities and similar sized organisations.

In reply to the issues raised, Margaret Read emphasised that the purpose of the strategy was to shift more access online, however no other access channels would be closed down. In respect of the move to shift parking to a mainly online service, a number of lessons had been learnt and it had been recognised that the online service had not been sufficiently user friendly and lacked the ability to support and help customers. Margaret Read confirmed that the new Customer Portal would be tested with residents across the borough before it went live and the lessons learnt from previous initiatives would help to ensure that residents had a good experience in using it. The committee heard that there would initially be a 'soft' launch of the Customer Portal to allow time to ensure that everything was working properly, before a full public launch. In addition, workshops would be offered to residents on how to use the Customer Portal and there would also be information available at libraries and at Brent Connects Forums on it. Customer Services were also liaising with the Head of Equality to ensure that the Customer Portal would meet the needs of those with disabilities. Margaret Read advised that IT and specialist external organisations had assisted to ensure customer confidentiality and that a password reminder facility was available that would be securely supplied through a series of security questions and sent to the resident's e-mail address.

Turning to telephone calls, Margaret Read advised that the switchboard took around 20,000 call a month, with the vast majority of calls correctly routed. Misrouting was monitored through feedback from residents and staff and she encouraged members and customers to report any instances of misrouting so that the matter could be looked in to and corrected and there was also an e-mail address where complaints of this nature could be made. Members heard that there were occasions when calls had been routed correctly, but the relevant extension number had not been answered. Margaret Read informed the committee that Automated Call Distribution (ACD) had increased its call answering rate from 80% to 90% and was performing well, although non ACD call rates were around 60%. There were pockets of underperformance across the council in telephone responses and these were being looked at. The committee heard that Serco were contracted to operate some services on behalf of the council, however any

complaints should be directed to the council. Members noted that the Customer Promise set out specific targets in responding to telephone calls, e-mails and letters. Margaret Read agreed to provide figures on the percentage of calls dropped, the average time the call took before it was dropped and to provide comparisons with other organisations on this.

Margaret Read advised that the triage service had been in operation for around eight weeks and was staffed by seven officers who had received cross training to enable them to handle a range of enquiries concerning housing, council tax, benefits and employment. Margaret Read explained that objective of the strategy was to ensure that residents felt that they had received an excellent experience of the service they had received. She stated that the Customer Services Centre was having to deliver difficult messages about how the way services were changing, particularly in respect of housing. An action plan had also been put in place to ensure mutual respect between customers and staff and for staff to convey difficult messages and staff had benefitted from training involving actors and role play.

Margaret Read advised that under data protection laws, the council could not pass on customer information to external organisations. She advised that retention of customer information was subject to Information Commissioner standards, with the length of retention depending on the type of information held and she agreed to provide further information to Councillor Colwill on this matter. Margaret Read advised that future reports to the committee could include more details on feedback about services, including information received from Focus Group meetings, exit surveys and benchmarking and comparing residents' views on an annual basis. She also agreed to look at ways of improving signage from the Civic Centre car park to the reception.

A member expressed disappointment that the relevant Lead Member, or the Leader in their absence, had not attended to respond to questions from the committee on this item. Peter Gadsdon (Operational Director – ICT, Finance and IT) acknowledged this point and would ensure that the relevant lead members were invited for future meetings.

The Chair requested an update on this item for the December 2015 Scrutiny Committee meeting.

RESOLVED:

that the progress being made in implementing the aims of the new Community Access Strategy be noted.

## **5. Housing pressures in Brent**

Jon Lloyd-Owen (Operational Director – Housing and Employment, Regeneration and Growth) presented the report and began by highlighting the significant population growth in the borough between the 2001 and 2011 Census exercises, in line with other London boroughs. In particular, there had been a marked increase in average family size and the numbers of children and this had led an increase in demand for homes in Brent. The demand increase, coupled with rising rents and prices, meant that for many housing was becoming increasingly unaffordable in the borough. Jon Lloyd-Owen advised that there had also been a large increase in the

amount of housing that was privately rented, rising from just over 17% in 2001, to around 32% now, whilst the proportion of social housing had remained around the same. House prices in Brent had continued to rise between December 2013 and December 2014 and this had contributed to the decline in the number of owner occupiers in the borough.

Jon Lloyd-Owen advised that homelessness applications and acceptances had been rising across London and this was expected to continue, with Brent receiving around 50 applications a week and it was anticipated that there would be around 700 applications for the year. Due to the high levels of homelessness and limited social housing, Jon Lloyd-Owen advised that Brent had the highest number of households in temporary accommodation than any other authority. Furthermore, Housing Benefit restrictions and rising rents had limited the council's ability to secure temporary accommodation in the borough, meaning increased reliance to seek properties in other London boroughs or further afield. Whilst the private rented sector played an important role in providing accommodation, demand helped increase rents and there had been an increase in multiple occupation, overcrowding and in some cases residents living in "beds in sheds". Jon Lloyd-Owen advised that to address this, the council supported the use of voluntary accreditation schemes for landlords and agents, whilst an additional licensing scheme requiring all properties let as houses in multiple occupation (HMOs) to be licensed had been introduced on 1 January 2015.

Jon Lloyd-Owen informed members that the welfare reform had raised critical issues that had impacted significantly on Brent residents and drove a number of pressures in the housing market. The council had set up a joint team with staff from Housing Needs and Revenue and Benefits working with Job Centre Plus and Brent Citizens' Advice Bureau to provide early stage support to mitigate the impact of the welfare reforms on Brent households. Members heard that the Overall Benefit Cap had led to 1,173 live cases being affected by it as of the end of January 2015 and the average rent in the borough was significantly more than the Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates for one, two, three and four bedroom properties. In order to tackle the housing issues, Jon Lloyd-Owen advised that local planning policy included plans for at least 22,000 homes between 2007 and 2026, of which 50% would be affordable housing. The Housing Strategy had also set a target of 5,000 affordable rent and low cost home ownership properties by 2019.

At this stage, Councillor Shahzad informed the committee that he managed two properties in the borough, however he did not regard this as a prejudicial interest and remained present to consider this item and participate in discussion.

During discussion, members welcomed the Lead Member for Regeneration and Housing in introducing the additional licensing scheme. A member expressed concerns about overcrowding and whether properties met Building Regulations and how was this checked. She also stressed the importance of communicating positive news about housing, such as the licensing scheme and publicising where enforcement had taken place. Another member also welcomed the licensing scheme and stated that the council and landlords should work together more closely to address homelessness and landlords should not be put off by what the council was trying to achieve. The committee asked how residents were informed about the licensing scheme and how many properties were available in the borough in the private rented sector. A member queried how many staff carried out

enforcement in respect of residential properties and welcomed the appointment of additional staff for this. He sought views on whether the LHA would reduce the choices and quality of accommodation of those on lower incomes or social housing tenants because of demand for private sector rented property. The member asked what the long term timeframe was for addressing this issue and were intermediate market rents helping. He also asked whether housing the less well off outside of the borough would risk changing the profile of Brent and by such action was the council failing this group. The committee queried who was responsible for land and property purchased outside the borough and what were the legal implications of this. It was asked what happened to the proceeds of any sale of property or land in Brent.

A member commented that there was a considerable amount of empty properties in the borough that could be obtained to help with housing, whilst there was also a number of pockets of land and sites available too, such as the Unisys building in Stonebridge Park, and more effort should be made to make use of these. He also stated that issue of extensions in rear gardens needed to be investigated more. Another member queried whether information held on landlords was confidential and commented that it was regretful that the large housing stock the council had in the 1980s had been eroded by selling a significant proportion to housing associations at lower cost over the past few decades. He added that he felt that the council's Pension Fund should invest more in housing.

With the approval of the Chair, Councillor Filson addressed the committee. Councillor Filson stated that the council was not receiving full value from the sales of the Right to Buy scheme because of the discounts that buyers were receiving. In respect of "beds in sheds", he commented that if this was not spotted earlier, it became increasingly difficult to take enforcement action the longer the building remained and he suspected that number of buildings of this type were growing in the borough.

In response to the issues raised, Jon Lloyd-Owen advised that overcrowding in the borough had increased as a result of the welfare reforms and some landlords had exploited the situation, particularly as some residents were keen to remain in Brent. Reports of overcrowding would be investigated and each licensed property would be inspected. Jon Lloyd-Owen advised that the last housing condition survey had been undertaken in 2008, however under the licensing scheme some 15,000 to 20,000 properties would be inspected. Members heard that the Enforcement Team was presently quite small with six members, however funding through the licensing scheme would allow for expansion of the team for around ten additional staff. Jon Lloyd-Owen advised that the council retained responsibility for residents who were provided temporary accommodation outside of the borough. With regard to new social housing that was acquired through capital purchases outside the borough, this would be subject to an access agreement between the hosting local authority and the council, whilst acquiring an existing site would be subject to agreement and negotiation.

Jon Lloyd-Owen advised that there was no timeframe in place yet in terms of addressing the housing issues the borough faced, however a key principle of the Asset Management Strategy was to consider investments and acquisitions opportunities and this would help provide more clarity over timing. He informed the committee that it was hoped funding would in place by May/June 2015 for the

Alperton regeneration scheme which would include increasing the amount of intermediate market rent properties. Jon Lloyd-Owen confirmed that information on landlords was confidential.

Councillor McLennan (Lead Member for Regeneration and Housing) stated that the licensing scheme was designed to enable the council to take action against rogue or criminal landlords and not to penalise good landlords. Members heard that the Private Sector Housing Forum met quarterly to help inform both landlords and tenants. Councillor McLennan acknowledged that the welfare reforms had led to residents having to leave the borough and this was also happening across other London boroughs. Although every effort was made to ensure residents could continue to live in Brent, there were occasions when this was not possible and this particularly affected young working families, which was an issue that needed to be addressed.

In respect of provision of social housing and for those on lower incomes in the future, Councillor McLennan stated that a strategy would need to be devised to provide a number of different types of housing and it was possible that land could be bought and assets created to reduce costs. The Asset Management Strategy would look at every asset the council had and consider what use could be made of it and Councillor McLennan stressed that a proactive approach would be needed. She confirmed that the proceeds of any sales would be reinvested in future developments. Councillor McLennan added that a large proportion of tenants who were evicted from properties were former looked after children and this was another issue that needed to be investigated.

The Chair requested an update on this item in six months' time, including details of the number of people who were leaving the borough.

RESOLVED:

that the report on housing pressures in Brent be noted.

## **6. Unemployment and Work Programme providers**

The Chair introduced the item and expressed on behalf of the committee its disappointment that representatives from two of the Work Programme providers, Reed and CDG, had given their apologies for absence. He also added that not all the information requested by members on this item had been provided, particularly in relation to specific information on the most deprived areas of each ward. The Chair stated that he would write a letter to officers and Work Programme providers on behalf of the committee setting out what information they wanted.

The Chair then invited Lucy Carmichael (Operations Manager, Ingeus, a representative of one of the Work Programme providers, to give a presentation to members. Lucy Carmichael began by explaining that only non-confidential information could be provided at this time as a non disclosure agreement between the council and the Work Programme providers was yet to be agreed. Lucy Carmichael then gave a presentation to members setting out Ingeus' approach to the Work Programme and the initiatives it undertook to support a stronger community in Brent, including:

- Tackling unemployment
- Working with small and medium sized enterprises
- Improving health and wellbeing
- Partnership working

Lucy Carmichael informed members that Ingeus staff undertook a number of roles to help Brent residents, including employment advisers, administrators, group facilitators, physical health advisers, mental health advisers and employer partnership coordinators. Amongst the partners Ingeus worked with included Clarion, who helped support clients who are deaf or hard of hearing. Lucy Carmichael then explained how the service it offered worked from the beginning to the end of the process and around 70% of the income Ingeus received came from after clients had gained employment. Members were also informed about the Training, Knowledge and Opportunities (TKO) programme, an innovative initiative set up by Ingeus.

During members' discussion, the committee asked if Ingeus were successful in obtaining employment for its clients. A member requested that the success of the Work Programme providers be demonstrated in a measurable way and he asked in what ways could the council help in getting residents into long term employment. Another member, in noting that Ingeus worked with a number of colleges, asked why there appeared to be no links with secondary schools and could this be looked at and he also asked whether there was any support to develop 'soft skills.' A member queried what the biggest skills gap and mismatch in the borough were and were there efforts to achieve a balance between obtaining what would be perceived as good jobs for clients as opposed to jobs where there was a demand for them to be filled. She also asked whether any jobs were sub-contracted and to who and was there a working relationship with organisations in the community and voluntary sector.

A member commented that he had worked with voluntary organisations for a number of years and stated that he had observed that a number of children who had left school early or who had not performed well significantly lacked the skills and knowledge of what employers expected from them and would struggle with the "culture of work" concept. He also enquired whether any participants on the Work Programme were on zero hour contracts. Another member stated that the council did not support zero hours contracts and any instances of Work Programme clients being put on such a contract should be investigated. A member commented that there were a number of young people who needed help in acquiring the necessary skills for employment.

In reply to the issues raised, Lucy Carmichael advised that Ingeus had targets set for getting their clients into employment and that this was the only way it received income and this helped drive it to be successful in its objectives. She added that it was also important for her organisation to demonstrate its success for its own reputation. Members heard that staffs' emotional intelligence was also assessed so that they could manage complicated cases. Lucy Carmichael informed the committee that her organisation did teach soft skills, such as work etiquette and the expectations of employers, to clients, and in-house English language training was also available. Members noted that those under 18 year olds were not eligible for the Work Programme. Lucy Carmichael advised that sustainability was one area which needed strengthening in terms of employment and skills, however an



example of an emerging industry in the borough was the care industry which was also sustainable and this was an area where training was being focused. Members heard that personality skills in the care industry were more important than experience and this would help younger people find work in this area.

Lucy Carmichael stated that it was ultimately up to the individual as to what kind of work they wanted and an action plan would be tailored to their desires and needs. However, in some instances there may be a need to take a job as a stepping stone to their ultimately desired job. Members heard that there were some sub-contractors involved in the Work Programme who provided specialist provision and an example of this was Brent Mind. Some community and voluntary sector organisations were also involved in sign posting and helping clients gain confidence. The committee heard that it was likely that some clients may be on zero hours contracts and their employment advisers would be aware of this. Lucy Carmichael also welcomed members to visit Ingeus's offices if they felt this would be of benefit.

The Chair emphasised the importance of the non disclosure agreement being reached between the Work Programme providers and the council. He added that it would be useful if there could be more information on how the council could assist Work Programme providers and their clients and that there needed to be a more joined up approach. He requested that the committee receive updates on unemployment levels and Work Programme providers on a quarterly basis.

RESOLVED:

that the report on unemployment levels in Brent and the Work Programme be noted.

## **7. Scrutiny Committee Forward Plan**

Members had before them the Scrutiny Committee Forward Plan. Councillor Colwill requested that the expansion of Byron Court Primary School and Uxendon Manor Primary School be added to the Forward Plan, in particular to consider their respective travel plans. There was also discussion amongst members about what officers would attend in respect of the equalities and HR practices report on 30 April and the committee would seek further advice in respect of this. A member also commented that members should be give more time to raise questions on agenda items rather than too much time being spent on the presenting of them.

The Chair welcomed members to send any other suggestions on the Scrutiny Committee Forward Plan to Cathy Tyson (Head of Policy and Scrutiny, Assistant Chief Executive's Service) or himself.

## **8. Any other urgent business**

None.

The meeting closed at 9.35 pm

A CHOUDRY  
Chair