



MINUTES OF THE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Tuesday 14 July 2015 at 7.00 pm

PRESENT: Councillor Filson (Chair), Councillor Colwill (Vice-Chair) and Councillors Daly, Farah, Kelcher, Stopp and Miller, together with Ms Christine Cargill, Mr Alloysius Frederick, Dr J Levison and Mr Payam Tamiz

Also Present: Councillors Choudhary and McClennan

Apologies were received from: Councillor Tatler and appointed observer Lesley Gouldbourne

1. Declarations of interests

None declared.

2. Deputations

None.

3. Minutes of the previous meeting

RESOLVED:-

that the minutes of the previous meeting held on 16 June 2015 be approved as an accurate record of the meeting subject to the addition of the following point being added at the end of item 7 – Access to Extended GP Services and Primary Care in Brent – Interim Report:

- Information on the level of off-line contact with GPs, ie telephone contact.

4. Matters arising

Members raised where the committee had, at its last meeting, requested information and this had not been supplied. It was agreed that in future the minutes of the meeting should include any such requests at the end of each item to give greater prominence to the request.

Information requested at the previous meetings was:

Minute 6 – Paediatric Services in Brent

- LNWHT to provide a copy of the data modelling used
- Explanation of how Treatment Function 'Paediatric' achieved savings while dealing with the same number of patients

Minute 8 – Public Health – priorities and progress

- Copy to of financial return for public health expenditure

- Details on how many people were offered and accepted a health check by GP practices
 - A breakdown of the drugs and alcohol budgets
- Minute 9 – Access to affordable childcare
- Information on use of discretionary housing payments
 - Allocation of Nursery Education Grant

5. **Performance of Brent Housing Partnership**

The following were present for this item and were introduced to the committee:

Tom Bremner – BHP Managing director

Peta Caine – BHP Operations Director

John Lloyd-Owen – LBB Operational Director, Housing and Employment

The Chair stated that Appendix B to the report should have been drafted in a more anonymous way and the committee would not be referring to it during consideration of the item.

John Lloyd-Owen introduced the report and explained that the Council had a management agreement with BHP. The second version had been introduced in 2013 for a 10 year period with a 7 year review. He outlined the role of BHP and the small client side team that monitored the contract.

Tom Bremner added that BHP was a legally constituted company run by a Board. He outlined the constitution of the Board and introduced Sheila Perry as a tenant representative who served on the Board.

In answer to opening questions from the chair of the committee, John Lloyd-Owen explained that Government intentions were still unclear on the requirement to dispose of high value properties when they became void. If the criteria were set on a regional basis it would have a lesser effect on Brent than if it was set locally. It was explained that the capital receipts from such disposals would go towards:

Discharging debt

Providing funding to subsidise extended Right to Buy

Contributing to the fund for development of brownfield sites

Providing funding for the Council to build replacement homes.

Members were concerned at the potential financial impact of the extended Right to Buy if there were not sufficient capital receipts. Members also noted an inevitable consequence of the policy which would be to see a retreat of social housing in high value areas. The committee asked for more information on the potential impact of the proposed extension of Right to Buy.

John Lloyd-Owen explained that the Government's intention that rents were to be reduced by 1% over the next 4 years would result in a substantial reduction in income of approximately £10m. Members expressed dismay over such a reduction and noted that this would need careful modelling to make choices on where the impact would be felt.

Sheila Perry outlined to the committee the nature of tenant involvement in the operation of BHP.

With reference to the Gypsy and Traveller site at Lynton Close, the committee was informed that a lot of work had been undertaken by both the Council and BHP to improve the site. As part of the pre-development process the identified sites included in the 2015/18 GLA Funding Bid had been subject to consultation with ward councillors and resident representatives but there was an awareness of the lessons learnt to better engage in the future. The potential of other sites was being looked at and local residents would be engaged in this. It was pointed out that many consultation events took place on a ward area basis and it would be good practice if BHP ensured that the local ward councillors were invited to them. Peta Caine outlined the approach taken in encouraging engagement and involvement by local residents.

Questions were asked on the cost of BHP modernising its computer systems, income from leaseholder charges and details of where the charges had been defended against legal action.

In exploring the recent improvement in rent collection, Tom Bremner explained that targeted action was being taken and Peta Caine outlined how support for those in arrears was provided so that the level of arrears could be reduced. She undertook to provide case studies as examples of areas of good practice and where lessons for improvement could be learnt. The cost of seeking possession orders was raised in the context of the level of arrears being sought. No figures were to hand and so the committee asked to be provided with this information.

The committee heard that the reduction of the benefit cap would have a range of impacts, especially on young people and families. The original cap mostly affected the private sector. The primary assistance the Council could offer was to support people into employment. Councillor McLennan (Lead Member, Housing and Development) pointed out that the Council's housing strategy had included building bigger homes to house larger families; this now needed to be reviewed to see if it was still viable.

The committee raised the high number of voids shown in the report and sought an explanation of what constituted a standard void and a major void. It was explained that a standard void was where the work could be carried out while the tenant was in occupation and a major void was when the property was empty and this followed the national standard. Tom Bremner acknowledged that void turnaround was an area for improvement. Tom Bremner was not able to provide any more information on the number of voids or on how much rent was lost as a result of void turnaround times but undertook to provide this.

Members of the committee noted the number one complaint being delays in job completions. In addition, it was observed that an improvement in communications with tenants and staff people skills would reduce the number of complaints.

In answer to a question on how cases of anti social behaviour were handled, Peta Caine explained that BHP had a team of ASB officers who worked with the Council's Community Safety office, police and others. It remained a challenge to resolve cases to the satisfaction of other tenants. A peer review of the operation had led to an action plan which was in the process of being implemented. The

committee asked to be supplied with a record of the open and closed cases dealing with anti social behaviour.

In addressing questions concerning illegal sub-letting, Peta Caine explained that a new system had been implemented that identified the various contacts made with tenants and requested feedback from them on any suspicions arising over the occupancy of the property. Cases were followed up with the assistance where necessary of the Council's Audit and Investigations team. There had been notable successes but there was a time lag in pursuing the case through the courts and finally gaining repossession of the property.

The chair thanks those who had attended for this item for their time.

The committee had requested the following information:

Paper on impact on housing service of the proposed extension of Right to Buy

Provision of suitably anonymised case studies of where dealing with people in rent arrears had worked well and not so well.

Cost of seeking possession orders and the charges passed on to tenants.

Number of voids identified as 'standard' and 'major'

Amount of rent lost due to voids.

Record of closed and open cases concerning anti social behaviour

6. Developing the Scrutiny work programme 2015/16

A revised Appendix B Draft Forward Plan was tabled.

The following list of items was put forward for potential inclusion in the committee's work programme:

- Commissioning and procurement practices – consideration of two contract specifications that are due for tender to consider their compliance with best practice guidance
- Educational attainment levels in schools in relation to those schools considered by OFSTED to be coasting
- Implementation of the Prevent agenda in Brent schools
- Impact of the Development Management Plan on planning policies for town centres
- The affordability of charges for uniforms, school trips etc.
- Planning policy in relation to the protection of local pubs and use made of assets of community value nominations
- Delays in waiting times for elective surgery
- Delays in waiting times for referral to cancer treatment
- Child and adolescent mental health services
- Performance of housing associations
- Adult education services provided by the College of North West London
- DWP – the impact of benefit sanctions on Brent residents and DWP programmes to support local people into employment
- Use of stop and search procedures by the Metropolitan Police.

It was confirmed that the Budget scrutiny panel would be reconvened to consider the budget for 2016/17.

The committee asked:

- that a briefing paper be provided on how the protection of pubs had been incorporated into the Development Management Plan.
- that a briefing paper be provided on the admissions policies adopted by different types of schools
- that the chair, education co-opted members and a senior officer from the Children and Young People's department meet to discuss the education related topics.

RESOLVED:

- (i) that the arrangements and principles for the effective operation of the Scrutiny Committee, as set out in paragraphs 3.1 – 3.6 of the report submitted, be noted;
- (ii) that the proposed process for defining the annual work programme for scrutiny detailed at paragraphs 3.10-3.14.

7. Date of next meeting

Noted – 12 August 2015.

8. Any other urgent business

None.

The meeting closed at 9.20 pm

D FILSON
Chair