

LONDON BOROUGH OF BRENT

MINUTES OF THE PERFORMANCE AND FINANCE SELECT COMMITTEE

Tuesday 16 February 2010 at 7.30 pm

PRESENT: Councillor Dunn (Chair), Councillor H B Patel (Vice-Chair) and Councillors Bessong, Butt, Mendoza, Pagnamenta and Van Kalwala

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

None declared.

2. **Deputations**

None received.

3. **Minutes of the Last Meeting held on 9 December 2009**

RESOLVED:

that, subject to correcting the name of the Interim Head of Community Safety to Genny Renard on pages 2 to 5, the minutes of the last meeting, held on 9 December 2009, be agreed as an accurate record.

4. **Matters Arising**

None raised.

5. **Waste Contract Performance**

Chris Whyte (Head of Environment Management) introduced the report and answered questions from Councillors on the performance of the Council's Waste Services Contract with Veolia, specifically with respect to waste and recycling, street cleansing, missed collections and complaints. Data to the end of December 2009 showed a recycling rate of 30.69%, an increase of 1.5% on the same period in the previous year. The main feature had been a significant reduction in waste and in landfill waste in particular. This was part of a wider UK and West London pattern, and had led to savings in the cost of disposal. Performance on street cleansing showed that the good performance of the previous year had been maintained, although there had been some concerns about the level of detritus in the first set of scores. Missed collections – attributed to snow and ice – had peaked around Christmas and the New Year. The situation had been rectified promptly, and the number of missed collections was now at an acceptable level. In general performance had been good, and the number of complaints was the lowest since the start of the current contract.

Asked what proportion of properties in the borough had access to recycling, Chris Whyte informed the Committee that 105,000 properties had recycling collections, 80,000 had green box collections, and 60,000 had green bins. The remainder had access to sack-based collections, with a good number of flats served by mini 'bring' sites. The Council had achieved its target of 30% recycling, and the current waste strategy review was part of the Council's improvement and efficiency strategy.

In answer to a question about the sweeping of streets after waste collections, Chris Whyte reported that, if crews did not clear up litter created as part of the process of waste collection, then that was a failure on their part, as they were equipped to do this. Street cleansing was part of the review process, and Chris Whyte agreed to take this issue into account when reviewing Veolia's performance.

Asked what Brent Council had done to promote a Bottle Bill, a scheme to impose refundable deposits on drinks containers, Chris Whyte informed the Committee that the idea of deposits was in its infancy in the UK, and that Brent watched developments with interest. He added that the Council's review would be considering a number of options.

The Chair suggested that the Council consider the use of bye laws to get retailers to provide waste recycling facilities.

RESOLVED:

that the report and members' comments be noted.

6. **Winter Maintenance 2009/10**

Chris Whyte (Head of Environment Management) introduced the report and answered questions from Councillors on how the Council had dealt with the severe weather conditions in December and January. Chris Whyte reported that Brent had an arrangement with the London Borough of Harrow to store and purchase salt. Brent had abided by government guidelines to store sufficient grit for six nights of heavy gritting. However, this reserve had been used up rapidly in the heavy snow before Christmas. Further supplies had been on order, but the weather became so severe that national supplies became scarce. Suppliers prioritised authorities in need, as a result of which some authorities in London also started to run out. The London Local Authorities Control Centre took on the role of distributing grit to those in greatest need, and Brent received 150 tonnes from Ealing and 141 tonnes from TfL. Further heavy snow fell on 7 January 2010, persisting for a number of days. Much of the remaining salt was used up, and Brent started rationing the stock going into the weekend of 9/10 January. The decision was taken to reduce the priority network. There was further heavy snow on 13 January, and Brent's stock was reduced to the lowest level so far – 19 tonnes. In response to the widening concern over salt supplies, the government convened the Salt Cell, which sought to co-ordinate and prioritise the distribution of salt. Brent was allocated 500 tonnes, which did not arrive. Veolia had to collect this, and was able to collect 315 tonnes. Currently around 430 tonnes were in stock, which Chris Whyte reported was sufficient to last the rest of the winter. Along with a number of other councils, Brent

had run very low on grit and had had to take decisions to ration it and reduce the priority network. Residents had been dissatisfied with the state of many residential roads, and these expectations needed to be managed. The situation had been very difficult, and a package of measures would be developed after a review of what had happened.

Asked why some roads thawed more quickly than others, and whether the Council could be more flexible in gritting residential roads, Chris Whyte reported that thawing depended on topography, the shape of buildings, the road surface and the presence of residual grit, and that the Council was willing to turn attention to non-priority roads if time and stocks allowed.

During a discussion of the Council's communication strategy during the severe weather, the Chair commended the fact that he had found more information on Brent's website than on those of other West London boroughs he had visited. However, it was recognised that some people, particularly elderly people, did not use the internet as much as others. Chris Whyte acknowledged this, but reported that the internet was the best way of getting information out quickly.

In answer to a question about the Council's legal obligations, Chris Whyte informed the Committee that the Council was required to treat its resilience network of priority roads. Given the opportunity, it could extend gritting to other areas. For example, in Brent hilly streets were treated. Pavements did not fall within the legal requirements. Responding to a comment that the area around Preston Road station had not been gritted well, Chris Whyte accepted that the Council had not been able to do some things quickly enough. Asked about the possibility of including, for example, access roads to housing estates in the priority network, Chris Whyte reported that the network could be revised as a result of the review of the Council's response. However, there would necessarily be cost implications. He added that there had been a number of complaints about the gritting, and these had been dealt with by explaining the situation.

The Committee discussed whether residents should be encouraged to clear their own pavements of snow, and Chris Whyte reported that the Council would welcome this. The Chair asked that the legal situation be clarified, and that the government be encouraged to include such an obligation in any future legislation. Chris Whyte also agreed to take up with Veolia the possibility of using lawn fertiliser spreaders as an effective means of distributing grit.

The Committee agreed a vote of thanks for the work that StreetCare and Veolia staff had carried out in very difficult circumstances.

RESOLVED:

- (i) that the report and members' comments be noted;
- (ii) that the Committee's thanks be conveyed to StreetCare and Veolia staff for their work in maintaining the Council's roads in the very severe weather.

7. **Waste Collection Strategy**

Chris Whyte (Head of Environment Management) introduced the report and answered questions from Councillors on the development of a revised Waste Collection Strategy for Brent. Chris Whyte reported that the review of the strategy was part of the wider review of waste and recycling, a gold project in the Council's Improvement and Efficiency Strategy. The aim was to submit a draft strategy to the Council's Corporate Management Team (CMT) in May and to the first available Executive meeting for decision. A period of consultation with the local community and other stakeholders would then start, and a revised strategy would be submitted for approval by Councillors towards the end of 2010, with a view to implementation in April 2011. Chris Whyte informed the Committee that David Pietropaoli (Waste Policy Manager), also present at the meeting, was developing the business plan, a key element of which had been a waste collection workshop with key advisers. The outcome had been a number of options carried forward for further appraisal. Consultants had been engaged to carry out this study, and were due to conclude by mid-March. The consultants' conclusions would form the basis of the report to CMT and the Executive. Everything was on track for implementation in April 2011.

Asked about the diversity of collection systems used by local authorities, Chris Whyte informed the Committee that there were many ways of collecting waste, and there was no consistent national approach. It was clear in Brent that the current system of the green box was no longer adequate, in view of the need for more recycling capacity, to which Brent was committed.

In response to a suggestion that residents should be consulted at an earlier stage in the process, Chris Whyte told the Committee that the current stage was one of building up a clear knowledge base of best practice in order to be able to deliver a set of proposals for CMT and the Council's Executive to offer to the public and other stakeholders. Cathy Tyson (Assistant Director – Policy) added that, in addition to the desirability of options to residents, the Council needed to balance methods of collection and disposal, and there were cost implications. Solutions might not necessarily be the same for all properties, although the aim was for the methods to be easy to use and value for money.

Asked about cross-boundary work with other boroughs, Chris Whyte reported that Brent was reliant on the West London Waste Authority, within which a programme of waste reduction and reuse was being co-ordinated across six London boroughs.

Chris Whyte told the Committee that fundamental changes in the strategy would be needed in order to generate the required £1.2m efficiency savings, and that many alternatives would be considered. Asked whether incentives would be provided for residents, Chris Whyte reported that he was confident that there would be policies on this. Responding to a question on compulsory recycling, Chris Whyte informed the Committee that the Council had been satisfied with its effectiveness and had not so far felt the need to prosecute anyone for failure to comply. He agreed that the message about compulsory recycling needed to be refreshed regularly, and that it needed to be clear that prosecution could be used as a last resort. The Council needed to be prepared to use this, but the experience so far had been that

providing the message had been sufficient to ensure compliance. Asked how new residents gained information about compulsory recycling, Chris Whyte told the Committee that information was supplied by estate agents, as well as being included in Council Tax information sent to residents.

Responding to a question about recycling in schools, Chris Whyte reported that a good number of schools were set up for recycling. There was an active programme in schools, with two officers going into schools to encourage recycling and carry out waste audits.

The Committee asked that in future it be made clear in the titles of reports that the strategy applied to domestic waste, and that commercial waste was a completely separate issue.

RESOLVED:

that the report and members' comments be noted.

8. Performance and Finance Review 2009/10 - Quarter 3

Cathy Tyson (Assistant Director – Policy) presented the report and answered questions from Councillors on the Council's spending, activity and performance in Quarter 3 of the financial year 2009/10. In general the Council had made progress towards delivering the key objectives in the Corporate and Community Strategies, with the majority of Vital Signs indicators – considered critical to the success of the Council – performing broadly in line with the targets set. A total of 53% were on or just below target, but 25% were well below target. One issue affecting the reporting of performance had been missing or delayed data. This had led to delays in reporting, and was being addressed internally.

Performance relating to the theme of 'a great place' was best, with 47% of targets regarded as low risk, and 35% as high risk. There was concern that recycling had missed its target slightly, also that there had been a slight increase in gun and knife crime, against the background of a longer-term downward trend. The level of sports participation by young people was below target, largely because of seasonal variation and the severe weather.

Performance around the theme of 'a borough of opportunity' had been affected particularly badly by a total of 27% missing data, which would be chased. Some of the missing data related to Local Area Agreement (LAA) targets on social care and the performance of the Primary Care Trust (PCT). The Council was continuing to focus on increasing the level of self-directed support to social care clients and, although the target had not been achieved, there had been a large number of new direct payments made to people with mental health needs. There had also been good performance on reducing delayed discharges from hospital.

Performance on the theme of 'one community', affected by missing data on 24% of targets, showed 39% of targets as low risk. The main concerns were Special Educational Needs assessments and the provision of local foster care placements.

Cathy Tyson reported that, although the number of looked after children was stable, the lack of in-borough foster placements meant that children were being placed with independent carers at a higher cost.

Also on the theme of 'one community', increased awareness of the MEND (Mind, Exercise, Nutrition, Do it!) programme, aimed at reducing child obesity, meant that this target had been achieved. While the slowdown in the housing market had proved a challenge to achieving the target of increasing the number of affordable homes, there were some housing schemes due for completion soon. There had also been good progress on reducing the number of households in temporary accommodation.

Duncan McLeod (Director of Finance and Corporate Resources) informed the Committee that there had been three main areas of overspend. One was children's services, partly as a result of the large increase in referrals following the Baby Peter case. The second aspect was the recession, which had affected income from parking and land charges, for example. In addition, there had been an increase in demand for services. However, the forecast underspend to be carried forward to the financial year 2010/2011 was currently around £1.4m. In terms of capital income and expenditure, the Council had received relatively generous amounts of resources for schools and it needed to be mindful of the work and delays involved in spending the money and engaging in dialogue with schools. Asked whether some projects could be fast-tracked, Duncan McLeod informed the Committee that the Council was looking at how it managed all its projects, and that the large regeneration projects involved a range of areas, such as interaction with schools, that needed improving.

The Committee noted that it had not seen performance data on Quarter 2, as this had been delayed, but it was reviewing Quarter 3 before the Council's Executive did so.

RESOLVED:

that the report be noted.

9. Community Use of Council Owned Buildings Task Group Feedback

James Young (Deputy Head of Property and Asset Management) introduced the report and answered questions from Councillors on the work of the group set up to look at use by the community of Council-owned buildings. Two meetings had been held, and it had been agreed that bimonthly meetings would take place in future. The process had been a learning experience for everyone involved, especially the issue of identifying the service departments responsible for monitoring the outputs of community groups, and the community engagement aspect was complex. Officers now understood which buildings were involved, although there were grey areas around community buildings and commercial operations. The Council wanted to establish a market rent for each building, with the rent abated in line with outputs measured against agreed criteria. At the next meeting, in March 2010, it was hoped to establish the abatement criteria. There were still issues to work through, for

example, that of responsibility for external maintenance, for which the Council had no budget.

Duncan McLeod (Director of Finance and Corporate Resources) informed the Committee that this was an evolving process, and was not easy. The recession had affected many of the community organisations involved, and this was not a good time for them to cope with change. The March 2010 meeting would be crucial in setting the abatement criteria and, while progress had been made with community organisations, much of what needed to be done required a budget that did not necessarily exist. The work of the task group was very helpful, but delivery was challenging.

The Committee noted that it would be monitoring the progress of work in the future as part of its work programme.

RESOLVED:

that the report be noted.

10. Performance and Finance Select Committee Work Programme 2009/10

The Committee agreed to add to the work programme:

- (i) the issue of planning enforcement relating to Section 215 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990
- (ii) the successes of the Anti-Social Behaviour Team and the impediments to its work.

11. Items requested onto the Overview and Scrutiny Agenda

None.

12. Recommendations from the Executive for items to be considered by the Performance and Finance Select Committee

None.

13. Date of Next Meeting

The Committee noted that the next meeting of the Performance and Finance Select Committee was scheduled for Wednesday 14 April 2010.

The meeting closed at 9.25 pm

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Chair