



## **MINUTES OF THE AUDIT AND STANDARDS ADVISORY COMMITTEE** **Held as an online virtual meeting on Tuesday 5 May 2020 at 6.00 pm**

**PRESENT** (in remote attendance) : David Ewart (Chair) and Councillors Donnelly-Jackson, Hassan, Long, Naheerathan, Nerva, Kansagra and Kabir

Independent Advisor: (in remote attendance) Vineeta Manchanda

Independent co-opted member: (in remote attendance) Margaret Bruce

Also Present: (in remote attendance) Councillor McLennan (Deputy Leader & Cabinet Member for Resources) & Nigel Shock (Independent Person)

### **1. Welcome**

David Ewart (as Chair) welcomed everyone in remote attendance to the first virtual meeting of the Audit & Standards Advisory Committee. Before asking all those attending to introduce themselves, he informed the Committee that he had been advised of Robert Cawley's and Karen McArthur's intention to step down as independent co-opted members on the Committee, with effect from 27 May 2020.

Although both had given their apologies for the meeting they had asked for their thanks to be passed on to everyone for the support received whilst undertaking this role. On behalf of the Committee, the Chair took the opportunity to thank Robert and Karen for their support and interest whilst serving as co-opted members and to wish them well for the future, with arrangements being made by the Director of Legal, HR, Audit & Investigations to find suitable replacements.

### **2. Apologies for absence and clarification of alternate members**

The following apologies for absence were received:

- Councillors Choudry with Councillor Kabir attending as a substitute member.
- Dr Rob Cawley & Karen McArthur (Independent co-opted Members)

### **3. Declarations of Interest**

None.

### **4. Deputations (if any)**

None.

### **5. Emergency Planning response to COVID 19**

Carolyn Downs (Chief Executive) introduced the report providing the Committee with an overview of the emergency planning arrangements introduced in a response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The report also included an update on the

service changes that had been introduced as part of the Council's overall response along with details of those services categorised as critical in terms of business continuity planning for Covid 19. In addition, the report included an update on the current financial impact on the Council, as a result of the measures introduced to respond to Covid 19, including the estimated loss of income and impact on the ability to achieve the savings agreed as part of the Council's budget for 2020/21.

In considering the report, the Committee noted:

- The scheduled of service change decisions and critical services identified in Appendix 1 and 2 of the report. Included as part of the emergency planning arrangements were emergency decision making powers delegated to the Chief Executive in order to make urgent decisions. The Committee were made aware that whilst many decisions had continued to be made under existing delegated powers, some had required urgent consideration under the Chief Executive's emergency powers, which had required enacting without the usual level of consultation.
- The arrangements in relation to the standing up of the GOLD emergency planning response alongside the London wide arrangements being co-ordinated through the London Resilience Forum and a Strategic Co-ordination Group, as detailed in section 3 of the report. The London Local Authority Gold arrangements had been implemented through a sub-regional structure with Brent falling within the West London sub region along with Ealing, Harrow, Hillingdon, Hounslow and Hammersmith & Fulham. Carolyn Downs advised that she was leading the West London sub-regional response.
- The main areas of heightened activity across the Council, as detailed in section 3.10 of the report. Specific areas highlighted included:
  - The focus on Adult Social Care in relation to supporting hospital discharges, care homes and domiciliary care;
  - The support and work with the Voluntary and Community Sector and charities in supporting residents across the borough;
  - The focus as a priority on protecting those people who were homeless or at risk of homelessness and in establishing procedures enabling essential checks and emergency repairs on council housing to continue;
  - The additional capacity being provided to deal with the increase in benefit and Council tax enquiries and roll out of the Government's Hardship Fund;
  - The work with schools to provide guidance and support co-ordination in relation to the childcare commitment for key workers and in terms of their eventual re-opening, including the provision of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE);
  - The ongoing enforcement efforts in relation to social distancing within parks and open spaces and work with local businesses regarding support on the small grant scheme and Business Rate relief;
  - The arrangements in place to ensure the continued delivery of Council services across most areas, although the response had required the closure of libraries and ceasing general public access to Council buildings.

- The financial update provided within Appendix 3 of the report, relating to the ongoing impact of Covid 19 on the Council's budget. The main areas of expenditure incurred to date had included:
  - Establishing a temporary mortuary in Marsh Road, Alperton to provide additional local capacity, with the eventual decommissioning of the facility to be co-ordinated as part of a London wide approach to managing capacity;
  - The Council procuring its own (PPE) for local care facilities and services, with estimated expenditure by June 2020 of approx. £2m;
  - Measures taken to secure accommodation for approx. 150 rough sleepers using hotel accommodation;
  - The provision and delivery of over 2000 food and basic medicine packages for over 8000 Brent residents on the shielded list with Bridge Park Leisure Centre being converted as a food storage depot;
- The consideration of options in relation to the recovery planning process once the current lockdown arrangements were either partially or totally removed, as detailed in section 4 of the report.

Having thanked the Chief Executive for her initial presentation, the Chair then invited comments with the following issues raised:

- (a) In response to a request for further details on the recovery planning process, Carolyn Downs advised that this was being structured around the themes of "retain", "reinvent" and "restore" with the approach being focussed both internally and externally. It was anticipated that the Council would need to retain more flexible working arrangements for staff, recognising the need to maintain social distancing and restrictions on use of public transport. Some elements of face-to-face services would however need to resume, although these would be subject to appropriate technological support, screens and PPE being made available. Plans were also being developed for the phased reopening of the Household Waste Recycling Centre with further consideration also being given to library provision. In addition, steps were also being taken to commission additional support in relation to the tackling of domestic violence, mental health, financial inclusion and the management of debt as the lockdown restrictions were eased.

In terms of member engagement in the recovery planning process, the Committee were advised that a series of member level briefings had already been provided (structured around the Brent Connect areas) with comments welcome on the process for further involving councillors as this moved forward.

- (b) Members praised the ongoing efforts in developing and delivering the Council's emergency response to Covid 19, including the information provided to Brent residents and also response to the local provision and supply of PPE.
- (c) Further details were sought on the arrangements and preparation in place should there be a need, once the lockdown measures had been eased, to re-impose them due to a second spike in infections and how this might be co-ordinated should different responses be required across different regions. In response, Carolyn Downs felt that the Council would be well placed to deal

with any potential reoccurrence given the preparations made and experience gained from implementation of the current restrictions. Whilst the Council would like to resume normal service as quickly as possible this was unlikely to be possible for the foreseeable future whilst the strategic emergency planning structure and powers remained in place. Whilst the Chief Executive was still exercising her emergency delegated decision making powers the majority of decisions being taken remained under existing delegated powers. Virtual meetings had also now been introduced to enable the normal decision making process to resume in relation to Cabinet and committees such as Planning and Audit & Standards. Plans were also being developed for Full Council to meet in July, although it was highlighted that officer resource to support the decision making process remained limited given the current focus on the emergency planning response and developing the recovery programme.

- (d) Further details were sought on proposals relating to the library service and operation of the home delivery service. The Committee noted that whilst use of the online library service had significantly increased during the current restrictions, operation of the home delivery service had been impacted by staff availability. The Chief Executive advised she would seek further details on the current level of provision available.
- (e) Clarification was also sought on the accuracy of the shielding list provided to the Council. In response, the Chief Executive advised that there had been some issues experienced with the details provided which had resulted in the Council making the decision, in cases of referrals from either adult social care or the voluntary and community sector, to pick up others not included on the original list. Whilst some of those on the list already had good support networks and did not require additional assistance, Council staff (on a voluntary capacity) had worked to contact everyone in order to review their needs and, where necessary arrange for the delivery of basic food supplies.
- (f) In response to a further query, clarification was provided by Minesh Patel (Director of Finance) on the use of unique identification reference numbers as part of the application process, which had been introduced for business support grants
- (g) Members were also keen to explore the potential impact of the emergency planning response in terms of any compromise that had needed to be made around service delivery standards, with the example provided of fly tipping. In response, the Chief Executive felt that the emergency response had not resulted in any compromises having to be made.
- (h) Given the recent national breakdown provided in relation to Covid 19 related deaths, members were keen to seek further details on the reasons for Brent being placed alongside Newham as one of the boroughs in London and nationally with the highest death rate compared to population. In response, the Chief Executive highlighted what she felt to be the correlation between a range of factors including population density, levels of deprivation poverty and ethnicity. Whilst noting the level of detailed research still needing to be undertaken, the adverse impact of the pandemic on BAME communities had already been identified as an issue along with residential care homes. In terms of the breakdown within Brent, the wards with the highest concentration

of Covid related deaths had been identified as Harlesden and Barnhill, with the latter due to the prevalence of care homes in the area.

Members were concerned to ensure the position in relation to the impact of the virus on BAME communities continued to be kept under close review. An update on current data (broken down on a community basis) had been requested from NHS partners to enable further analysis and the targeting of specific support. The Committee also noted that a study had been commissioned by the NHS to explore the issue in more detail with the Chief Executive also pointing out that she had been in contact with the Director of Public Health England on the same issue, given the particular impact within Brent.

The Committee also noted the update provided by the Chief Executive on the significant work undertaken with care home providers across the borough in terms of the introduction of public health measures, infection control and provision of PPE. Work was also ongoing with the police in relation to supporting the enforcement of social distancing measures across the borough, with particular issues identified in relation to Harlesden Town Centre, Ealing Road and Kingsbury High Street and around reinforcement of the measures once the restrictions started to be eased.

The work of the Poverty Commission established by the Council was also seen as key, in terms of exploring the impact of the pandemic on communities with high levels of deprivation and poverty.

- (i) Details were sought on the level of partnership working established with local NHS providers and also in respect of the hospital discharge process involving placements within care homes. In response, the Chief Executive advised that the partnership arrangements established locally with the NHS had worked well although, as with other areas, issues had been identified in relation to the process of patients being discharged back into care homes without testing or detailed discussions with the relevant local authorities. Alternative step down provision had now been provided as an interim measure between patients being discharged and returned to care home facilities, with the Chief Executives from each of the boroughs due to meet with the London North West Healthcare NHS Trust co-ordinator to review the ongoing arrangements and funding moving forward.
- (j) In response to a query relating to tracing and tracking control measures, the Chief Executive advised that further guidance was currently awaited on the approach being developed by Central Government and potential support local authorities may be required to provide, which would be subject to further review as soon as detailed were announced. In terms of testing, the Committee noted the establishment of a large-scale testing centre at IKEA in Brent Park.
- (k) Details were also sought on the approach developed in seeking to maintain levels of educational attainment and also in terms of any phased re-opening of schools. In response, the Chief Executive outlined the focus on maintaining education provision across all schools within the borough and proactive support being provided for headteachers as part of the ongoing discussion

with Government around the phased reopening of schools and on which age groups this should initially be focussed. This had involved the Strategic Director, Children & Young People undertaking weekly briefings with all headteachers in order to consider the way forward and provide the necessary level of advice, guidance and support alongside proactive engagement with the Department of Education.

- (l) Members noted and welcomed the increased focus in support for those children identified as vulnerable and in relation to referrals involving domestic violence. Whilst noting that the initial level of referrals had reduced, given that many came through schools, these were now starting to increase with many involving some aspect of domestic abuse. As referenced during the initial update provided, additional support was being commissioned in relation to addressing any increase in referrals relating to domestic violence and mental health, should they be experienced post lockdown with social workers still remaining in touch with vulnerable clients, including face-to-face visits where appropriate.
- (m) Members also noted the role of the mutual aid groups established in response to the pandemic. Whilst some had chosen to operate independently, the Chief Executive advised that the Council were keen to ensure this support was co-ordinated and harnessed as far as possible through Enfield CVS.
- (n) Whilst noting the detailed review undertaken by the Committee, Members also remained concerned to ensure that scrutiny of the emergency response and more importantly lessons learnt was re-established as soon as possible. In response the Chief Executive advised that the Council's Scrutiny Committee's were already scheduled to start meeting in July as originally planned, with the work programme planning process to commence shortly. This would provide an opportunity to highlight those issues members were keen to focus on, although this would be subject to the more limited officer support initially available given the focus on delivery of the emergency response and also as the Council moved into its recovery phase.
- (o) As a final issue raised, in relation to the initial update provided, further details were sought on the way in which lessons learnt were being recorded for further review under the emergency planning arrangements. The Chief Executive advised that under the Gold command arrangements, actions identified at each meeting were formally logged. The need to ensure that an evaluation process was established had also been recognised as specific elements of the response were either decommissioned or stood down as the Council moved into the eventual recovery phase.

As no further issues were raised under this section of the update the Chair once again thanked the Chief Executive for the responses provided and then moved on to invite Minesh Patel (as Director of Finance) to introduce the accompanying financial update, as set out within Appendix 3 of the report.

In introducing the financial update the Committee noted:

- The work being undertaken to monitor and track all financial costs being incurred in relation to Covid 19 in support of any subsequent claim for

- reimbursement alongside the assessment relating to the impact on the Council's budget for 2020/21 and beyond taking account of not only the level of costs being incurred but also loss of income;
- The estimates provided within the update had been based on a baseline assumption that the lockdown protocols would last for an initial three month period with a further three month period of recovery;
  - The summary provided in section 3 of the report outlining the various emergency funding measures announced by the Government (as of 14 April 2020) in response to the Covid 19 outbreak. An additional £1.6b of support had subsequently been announced for local councils on 18 April, and whilst no specific allocations had yet been confirmed for individual authorities it was anticipated this would equate to an additional allocation of approx. £9.1m for Brent;
  - The outline of the key financial challenges and additional funding pressures (over and above the current budget agreed in February 2020) identified across Council departments relating to Covid 19, with the total additional spend (to 17 April 2020) detailed within section 4.3 of the report;
  - The additional update, detailed with appendix 4 of the report (circulated as a supplementary paper) on the arrangements for the provision of business support grants.

The Chair thanked Minesh Patel for his initial introduction and then invited comments with the following issues raised:

- (a) Focussing on the longer-term financial impact on management of the Councils budget, members welcomed the introduction of the tracking system being used to record and monitor the additional pressures. It was noted this included not only any additional expenditure being incurred but also loss of income from operational activities and the impact on delivery of savings, the capital programme and treasury management issues, including growth, future funding and investment opportunities. Whilst recognising there would be a need to keep the position under constant review, as the lockdown was eased, the ongoing longer-term impact was expected to also be significantly affected by the fact that the outcome of the Local Government Spending and Fair Funding Review had also now been pushed back.
- (b) Members also welcomed the focus in relation to the impact of Covid 19, on delivery of the Council's planned savings for 2020/21, as detailed in section 5 of the report. It was noted that the initial review had identified that of the £7.4m planned savings in 2020/21, £1.6m had already been delivered, £2.9m were at risk of not being delivered and £2.9m would not be delivered. Further analysis was being undertaken on the savings identified at risk and potential mitigating actions in both the short to medium term. It was recognised that this process would also need to involve a review of the savings proposals already agreed, within the context of the recovery planning process, which the Director of Finance advised would be built into the ongoing review and wider Medium Term Financial Planning process.
- (c) Details were also sought on the additional support being made available for small businesses in terms of Business Rate Relief and commercial tenancy arrangements. In response, the Director of Finance drew the Committee's attention to the additional details provided within appendix 4 of the report,

which set out the support currently being made available to business ratepayers through the Government support scheme. In terms of its own commercial tenancies, the Council were involved in ongoing discussions and review with their tenants regarding management and support of the leases.

- (d) A query was also raised in relation to the recently announced provision of £76m by the Government to support services for vulnerable people and in relation to tackling domestic abuse. The committee noted that this funding had initially been identified for use to support the voluntary and community sector and charitable organisations rather than being allocated directly to local authorities. As highlighted earlier, the Council had already started work to commission additional support in relation to these areas linked to local voluntary and community sector provision.
- (e) Details were also sought on any funding being made available within the various support packages designed to provide technical assistance and support for business adaptations required as the lockdown restrictions were eased. The Director of Finance advised that no whilst no direct funding had yet been made available for this purpose, support had been made available in relation to Business Rate discounts and other small business grants which the Council were administering.
- (f) In response to a specific query regarding plans to continue with the London Borough of Culture Programme, the Chief Executive advised that proposals were currently subject to discussion with the Deputy Mayor for London. Whilst it would not be possible to deliver the original programme given the current circumstances, funding was available to support a revised programme.
- (g) The Committee were also keen to explore the impact of the current financial position in relation to the Council Tax Support (CTS) and Local Welfare Support Scheme. It was noted that whilst the long-term impact was still to be fully assessed, the financial modelling undertaken had been designed to reflect the increase in CTS and Universal Credit claims, excluding the Hardship Funding having already been made available.
- (h) An update was also sought in relation to any support available for small-scale private landlords. Whilst noting that no specific support had been made available, the committee noted that assistance may be available under the discretionary support and small grants provided for small businesses, subject to further guidance being made available by the Government.
- (i) The need identified to also recognise the potential financial impact on Section 75 funding arrangements and how it may be possible to utilise these as an additional means of developing wider partnership work with local health partners focussed around initiatives such as the Better Care Fund.
- (h) As a final issue, the Committee noted the work being co-ordinated through London Council's involving Finance Leads across all boroughs in terms of the approach being developed to manage and mitigate the overall financial impact of the pandemic and issues needing to be addressed with Government. Councillor McLennan, as Deputy Leader, advised she would ensure the



Committee were kept updated on the progress with these discussions as they moved forward.

As no further issues were raised the Chair, once again thanked the Chief Executive and Director of Finance for the comprehensive nature of the update provided and it was **RESOLVED** that the Committee:

- (1) Thank all staff involved for their ongoing efforts in the co-ordination and delivery of the Council's emergency response to Covid 19.
- (2) Note the arrangements and assurance provided in relation to the governance arrangements in place to support the emergency planning process along with the responsiveness of decisions being made.
- (3) Note the schedule of service change decisions that had been made and details of those services categorised as critical in terms of business continuity planning for Covid 19, as detailed within Appendices 1 and 2 of the report.
- (4) Note the financial update provided and resource implications as a result of the actions taken by the Council in response to the Covid 19 pandemic, as detailed in Appendix 3 of the report and on which it was requested further updates continue to be provided for the Committee.
- (5) To support the measures being taken to seek further data and information in relation to the impact of the virus on BAME communities as a means of enabling further analysis and to inform the targeting of any specific support required in order to tackle the virus and minimise, as far as possible, its ongoing impact within the relevant communities.

## 6. Annual Governance Statement

The Committee received a report from the Director of Legal, HR, Audit & Investigations setting out the draft Annual Governance Statement (AGS) for 2019/20, as required under the Accounts and Audit Regulations 2015.

In considering the report, the Committee noted:

- The seven core governance principles introduced by CIPFA upon which the review of governance arrangements and production of the AGS had been based, as detailed in section 3.4 of the report;
- That whilst no significant governance issues had been identified during 2019/20, an additional summary had been included within section 5 of the report outlining the governance arrangements in place to support management of the Covid 19 pandemic;
- The importance of the AGS in outlining the Council's framework of control in relation to its Governance arrangements and in terms of managing risk.

Members were advised that they were being invited to comment on the draft AGS in advance of its formal consideration and approval by the Audit and Standards Committee. The following issues were raised:

- (a) Whilst welcoming the report, members advised they would be keen to review and develop the future format and content of the report to include enhanced focus on the measures being taken to support the core governance principles with the following areas highlighted as specific examples integrity, engagement and intervention;
- (b) The need to consider and reflect as part of future Statements the relationship between the Council's Audit and Scrutiny functions, with the committee noting the approach being developed to improve co-ordination between each functions respective work programmes.
- (c) The need identified to consider, as an additional impact of the governance related issues arising from the Covid 19 pandemic, the risks in relation to Pension Fund investments.

The Committee noted that whilst the AGS would be subject to detailed review by Grant Thornton, as the Council's External Auditors, it was not anticipated that any significant issues were likely to be raised.

As no further issues were highlighted, the Advisory Committee **RESOLVED** to endorse, subject to the comments above, the draft 2019/20 Annual Governance Statement for reference on to the Audit and Standards Committee for formal approval.

## **7. Forward Plan 2020/21**

The Committee received and noted the 2020/2021 Work Programme, which included the dates for future meetings and would be included for ongoing review as an agenda item for all future meetings.

Following on from comments highlighted under the Annual Governance Statement in terms of developing relevant links between the Audit and Scrutiny work programmes, the Chief Executive advised that she would look to review and take this issue forward with the Assistant Chief Executive outside of the meeting.

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

None.

The meeting closed at 8.03 pm

David Ewart  
Chair