



Brent

MINUTES OF THE RESOURCES AND PUBLIC REALM SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Tuesday 14 July 2020 at 6.00 pm

PRESENT: Councillor Kelcher (Chair), Councillor Kansagra (Vice-Chair) and Councillors S Choudhary, Gbajumo, Johnson, Kabir, Mashari, Nerva and Stephens

Also Present: Councillors M Butt (Leader of the Council), McLennan (Deputy Leader and Lead Member for Resources), Tatler (Lead Member for Regeneration, Property & Planning), Southwood (Lead Member for Housing & Welfare Reform) and Sheth (Lead Member for Environment)

1. Apologies for absence and clarification of alternate members

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Aden.

2. Declarations of interests

In relation to agenda item 7, Councillor Nerva declared that he was the Chair of the Active Travel Forum for Brent Council and a member of the steering group for Brent cyclists.

3. Deputations (if any)

None.

4. Minutes of the previous meeting

Resolved

That the minutes of the last meeting held on 12 March 2020 be approved as a correct record.

5. Matters arising (if any)

None.

6. Chair's Report

The Committee considered the Chair's report, which set out details regarding the selection of topics for the current meeting, as well as work undertaken by the Committee outside of public meetings.

Resolved

That the Chair's report be noted.

7. The Public Realm

Councillor Sheth, Cabinet Member for Environment introduced a report on the public realm strategies for Brent, including Brent Council priorities, strategies and policies, planned strategy review and the impact of the COVID19 epidemic and public health restrictions. The Committee was then invited to raise questions on the report, which focused on a number of key areas as highlighted below:

- In response to a question from the Committee, it was noted that a climate change strategy had not been included in the report because the Council had been undertaking a much larger piece of work encompassing all portfolios. The report was focused primarily on the emergency response to COVID19, and in particular the efforts to encourage active travel across the borough.
- The Council had been successful in its bid for funding from Transport for London (TfL) and the Department for Transport (DfT) for 33 new school streets. In deciding where these would be, it would consider air quality as well as where it would be logistically possible. Officers were working directly with schools to develop an understanding of how school streets would be managed, and all 33 school streets would be in place by September.
- The Council had been using air quality data and public health indicators to measure success in improving the use of active travel and reducing motor vehicle use. It would also take evidence from school surveys as these gathered information on how children travelled to school and the Common Place platform would provide the Council with information on residents' current experiences. The Council would also continue to engage with community groups such as Clean Air for Brent and utilise the Air Quality Task Group's findings. It did not expect habits to change immediately and as such this would be a medium term plan, which required a cultural shift. The next stage for the council would be to engage with stakeholders, such as the National Health Service (NHS) and schools, to ensure they can work together to realise the benefits of active travel for all parties.
- It was noted that TfL was in a difficult financial position which had been exacerbated by the effects of COVID19. The Council had been directly bidding for funding from TfL which it felt took a surprising approach and did not consistently apply the criteria and timeframes the council had been working towards. There had been disquiet amongst many London councils about how TfL had distributed these funds and many would have liked to have seen a more strategic approach and recognition of the ambition of those councils which were in the infancy of their active travel plans. The Committee were reassured that the Council had worked tirelessly to put itself in the best position to receive this funding. Funding that had been received would go towards projects such as school streets and a strategic cycle route along Harrow Road. Engagement with residents would focus on what they want to see in their borough, gathered via the Common Place platform, whilst recognising the financial and logistical constraints of any proposals.

Once this had informed the Council's planning it would look to engage with ward councillors and local residents about what would work in their wards. It was noted that these plans were a medium to long term ambition and so engagement would not start immediately.

- It was noted that the COVID-19 pandemic also provided significant opportunities for the Council to adopt radical new approaches and implement a range of measures that will help address wider priorities around public health, inequalities, air quality and climate change. Its immediate point of call was to gather evidence, which would include conversations with local authorities across Europe as well as local residents about how these measures would have a positive impact on their lives. Particular focus needed to be given to instilling a cultural change in the borough, which included understanding the way residents travel as a health as well as an environmental benefit. With working patterns changing and there being a shift towards mobile working, the Council would look to ensure that any time in the office would be a pleasant experience, perhaps looking at the public realm, the commute and diversification of the high street.
- In response to a question about cycle hangars, it was noted that the cheapest car permit in the borough was lower than the cost of using a hangar. However, cycle hangars cannot be reduced in price due to the cost of their construction and maintenance. The Council would soon be looking at parking as a whole and could look at prices as part of this. There had been some instances of cycle hangars being misplaced across the borough. The Committee was reassured that there was a consultation process in place for ward councillors and local residents to comment on proposals, and that hangars were constructed in localities that had requested them. Moreover, in instances in which they were replaced, the Council would not need to cover the cost.
- A question was asked about the consideration the Council had given to disabled and elderly residents when designing the new public realm. The Committee was assured that it was standard policy that all proposals be inclusive of all users. The Disability Forum had also been consulted, and any proposals would follow the Royal National Institute of Blind People 's (RNIB) guidelines.
- It was noted that community gardens would be included in plans in the public realm to enhance the appearance of localities and encourage community cohesion. The Council was working with the Communications team to promote this, local community groups to facilitate this and examining possible funding opportunities. A private company would maintain the planters that the council intended to use for its low traffic neighbourhood for their first year and it hoped to work with ward councillors to encourage local residents to help maintain these. It was suggested that some of the mutual aid groups formed due of COVID19 could be utilised for this purpose.
- The Council had committed to a number of priorities regarding transport and public realm schemes aimed at creating healthy, sustainable places and increasing the number of journeys made by walking and cycling. However,

this did not include the A5 corridor. It was noted that it had a partial scheme developed with Camden Council for the Kilburn High Road section, however a wider strategic conversation was needed. The corridor was originally part of TfL's priority list but has since fallen off their radar. Brent and Camden had been attempting to engage with Barnet, Westminster and Harrow to bring this conversation forward.

- The Committee asked if there were any plans to introduce a 20mph speed limit across the borough. It was noted that proposals on this were being explored before COVID19 and once the initial emergency measures were in place the Council would again look at this. The main difficulty its implementation faced was enforcement, because at present the only body able to enforce speed limits was the police. Having said this, there were clear benefits to 20mph zones. People were more likely to be confident in active travel if motor vehicles were travelling at less speed. Also, poor air quality was largely due to motor vehicles stopping and starting, hence why levels were high around schools and high streets. Another point highlighted was that some initiatives may not have a direct impact on air quality, such as landscaping, but do have indirect impacts such as encouraging active travel.
- It was noted that low traffic neighbourhoods would stop areas becoming rat runs and would divert traffic onto main roads, therefore encouraging more walking and cycling. In any one area there could be three points in which a road is closed, and the Council would use planters to do so. The council was currently looking to address some concerns highlighted by emergency services regarding access, after which it would announce where these low traffic neighbourhoods would be.
- In response to a question regarding the Council's long-term vision for adapting roads for non-carbon travel it was noted that it would want to encourage several modes of transport to be adopted by residents. It would hope more people engage in active transport and as a result see better health outcomes for residents. The Council was committed to working towards becoming carbon-free by 2030. Moreover, it was looking at what it could do to support buses in becoming electric, and assured the Committee that it would work alongside TfL to fulfil this when the technology is available. While it appreciated that buses take up much of the borough's road space, they could carry a number of people at any one time and potentially reduce the use of cars as a result. In relation to the A5 corridor, the Council was looking to put a strategic plan together with Camden, Barnet, Westminster and Harrow to address this specifically.

In summing and in considering proposals for recommendation to the Cabinet, it was proposed to recommend to Cabinet that the new parking strategy ensures that it is always cheaper to park a bike than a car in the borough, overcoming the anomaly that the cheapest resident parking permit is currently more expensive than using a bike hangar. It was also proposed that the Cabinet should bring forward a timetable to ensure that the borough has a default 20mph speed limit on its roads, subject to an environmental audit.

It was proposed that it should be recommended to Cabinet that it ensures that any slippage from the capital budget was reinvested into active travel as a viable and

beneficial capital spend. It was also suggested that the Council's Health and Wellbeing Board should consider a paper on how the NHS could contribute to active travel (as a public health issue) across multiple boroughs in North West London. It was suggested that the Chair write to the Greater London Authority Transport Committee to encourage them to investigate and scrutinise the allocation of active transport funds.

It was also proposed to recommend that the department ensure that any future transport strategies/plans include clear measurements and modelling for active transport and the impact on air quality and that low traffic streets were rebranded in a way that is clearer for the public to understand, for example as 'healthy' or 'peaceful' streets.

Resolved

That it be recommended to Cabinet;

- 1. That the new parking strategy ensure that it is always cheaper to park a bike than park a car in Brent, thereby ensuring that the cheapest resident parking permit is more expensive than using a bike hangar**
- 2. That 20mph be adopted as the default speed on Brent roads, subject to an environmental audit, and that a timetable be drawn up for the introduction of a 20mph speed limit across the borough.**
- 3. That unspent balances in the capital budget be reinvested in active travel.**
- 4. That any future transport strategies and plans include clear measurements and modelling for active transport and the impact on air quality.**
- 5. That low traffic streets be rebranded in a way that is clearer for the public, for example 'Healthy Streets' or 'Peaceful Streets'.**

and

- 1. That correspondence be addressed to the Greater London Authority Transport Committee to encourage them to investigate and scrutinise the allocation of active transport funds.**
- 2. That correspondence be addressed to the Health and Wellbeing Board to suggest that it receive a report on how the NHS can contribute to active travel, as a public health issue, across multiple boroughs in North West London.**

The Committee also made the following information requests:

- 1. A breakdown of how the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) is being spent on public realm projects.**
- 2. An indication of the total percentage of the CIL being spent on the public realm.**

8. The Brent Economy

Councillor Tatler, Cabinet Member for Regeneration, Property & Planning introduced a report on the economic strategies for Brent, including Brent Council priorities, current strategies and policies, and the impact of the COVID19 epidemic and public health restrictions, specifically on business support, high streets, and employment. The Committee was then invited to raise questions on the report, which focused on a number of key areas as highlighted below:

- The Committee noted the importance of procurement in supporting local businesses throughout COVID19. The Social and Ethical Value Procurement Policy set out the ways in which the council would approach procurement. It would prioritise supporting local businesses to bid for contracts confidently, making them aware of relevant opportunities and creating business alliances. Moreover, the Council was looking to promote local businesses, for example through the Shop Local campaign. Concerning high streets, it was working with local businesses to understand what they need to thrive and was individualising action plans with targeted investment. Agents were being put in place to help occupy vacant business spaces for a variety of uses.
- In response to a question from the Committee, it was noted that the borough had no business improvement districts. It was, however, something the Council had carefully looked into and had most recently explored Wembley as a potential host of a bid. Local businesses would be asked to contribute through a levy, and an established grassroots business community would need to be in place beforehand. The Council would continue to explore the possibility of the bid, but at this time there were no immediate plans to put one together.
- There was an expectation that Controlled Parking Zones (CPZs) on the borough's high streets would lead to an increase in footfall and encourage residents to use active travel. The Council needed to engage with local businesses to outline the benefits of such a policy and while CPZs were in place on many of the borough's highstreets, a borough-wide policy was a consideration.
- The Committee was reassured that the Black Community Action Plan had been integrated into the council's post COVID19 recovery plan, with a particular focus on employment opportunities for black residents.
- It was noted that the council was working with West London Business, the West London Prosperity Board, the Park Royal Business Group and the local and regional Federation of Small Business. The Chambers of Commerce did not have a particularly strong grouping, but the council would look to strengthen this as well as business associations across the borough. The West London Alliance, alongside Oxford Economics, had put together an economic recovery plan that revealed that the borough would be hard hit, especially those in the aviation industry, care sector and those workers that had been furloughed. Indeed, the borough had the highest number of furloughed employees in London. The Committee was reassured that the council would continue to support both employers and employees throughout the recovery phase.

- The Council had not considered using powers under the Localism Act to help local businesses at this time, but it was willing to explore this possibility. Any such support would need to be targeted at those most in need, rather than a blanket approach. For example, the discretionary grant received from central government was targeted specifically at micro businesses. Presently the Council was working on a case-by-case basis, but it was in a position to take a more strategic approach if needed.
- In response to a question from the Committee, it was noted that the Council had received data on the number of employees that had been furloughed in the borough, but not on the types of employment these employees were in.
- In relation to future working arrangements, it was noted that there may be less need for office space. Having said this, with social distancing in place the opposite may be true. It was expected that many companies would look to change their working arrangements and encourage more remote working going forward. Many new housing developments were looking at including office space in their designs.
- It was noted that self-employed residents had received little financial support from central economy during COVID19. The discretionary grant received by the council did not cover the self-employed. The Council had been and would continue to lobby central government to ensure these people did not fall through the gaps. The Council was using its Brent Works and Brent Starts platforms, business newsletters, Shop Local campaign and online support to engage with businesses across the borough.

Resolved

That it be recommended to Cabinet;

- 1. That the Cabinet Member for Regeneration works with the West London Prosperity Board to set up a jobs summit with large local employers (regardless of sector) to look at ways the public and private sectors can work together to support local employment.**

The Committee also made the following information requests:

- 1. Information on how the Black Community Action Plan was being integrated into the economic recovery.**
- 2. For the economic recovery plan of the West London Prosperity Board to be shared with the Committee.**

9. Social Welfare in Brent

Councillor Southwood, Cabinet Member for Housing and Welfare Reform, introduced a report on the social welfare implications of the current COVID19 epidemic and the support available to Brent residents and proposals for additional support. The Committee was then invited to raise questions on the report, which focused on a number of key areas as highlighted below:

- In response to a question from the Chair it was noted that the Council would seek to support as many people as it could through the interest-free loan proposal and those that it was unable to support financially would be signposted to other organisations that could. Loans would be given only to those that were in a position to pay them back, and potential recipients would be referred to the credit union to complete the assessment to ascertain this. Potential recipients would also get direct access to financial advice agencies should they struggle with repayments.
- The Committee expressed concern about the cost of supporting the Council Tax Support Scheme as more residents become eligible. The council had already factored in a likely increase in those applying to the Hardship Fund and to the Council Tax Support Scheme. The Committee was reassured that the spend would be regularly monitored and it was unlikely the Council would find itself in a position where it would be unable to honour the Council Tax Support Scheme. Strong financial controls would be in place to ensure total expenditure does not exceed the grant amount.
- Referrals for the interest-free loans proposal are expected to come from all avenues. Frontline staff, and in particular those at the borough's hubs, the Housing team and the Customer Services team, were being trained to be able to make those assessments. Decision-making would be as far down the chain as possible to allow for quick decisions. The Council was working with over 50 voluntary organisations and advice agencies on this proposal. Councillors would receive training to enable them to identify and support those that may benefit from this additional support.
- The Committee expressed concern about Local Housing Allowance and the possibility that these rates were reduced post COVID19, as well the reversal of the easing of landlord restrictions and notice periods. It was agreed that the council needed to take an integrated approach when responding to the impacts of COVID19 which would help identify vulnerable residents.
- Residents needed to prove that they had been financially impacted by COVID19 to be eligible for funding. Those that had been unwell with symptoms of COVID19, but were never tested and as such had no medical proof of having had the virus, would still be covered should they be able to prove financial hardship.
- The borough had seen many of its job centres closed in recent years. Some job centre staff had been relocating to hubs and, despite these closures, the council was working more closely with job centres than it had been in the past. The Council would also ensure the Department for Work and Pensions were aware of the proposals outlined in the report.
- It was noted that the Local Welfare Assistance Scheme had been utilised in response to COVID19 but had not been included in the proposals. The scheme would be reviewed later in the year, at which point it would be included as part of the council's wider offer.

- It was noted that the council had begun recover missed council tax payments. As set out in its Council Tax Protocol, the Council would work with those unable to pay to see how it could support them. Collection procedures were constantly kept under review and the Committee was assured that further action would only be taken in instances of payment refusal.
- In response to a question from the Committee it was noted that the council was proactively contacting residents about debt management and manageable payments of council tax. It was also looking to bring in a COVID19 online dashboard which would hold information on relevant services and collate and respond to potential issues for residents.
- The Council had detailed information on its tenants who had fallen into arrears and assessments would be undertaken on this basis. Of concern was those who were renting in the private sector, as the Council did not have access to their information. It may be possible to undertake more proactive outreach as a result of the information gathered due to COVID19. The Committee was reassured that permission was always sought from residents should the council wish to undertake a detailed assessment.
- It was noted that the Council was not able to divert slippage from the Hardship Fund to those who had no recourse to public funds, but it was going to apply for central government funding in order to support these residents.
- In regard to the longevity of the schemes, it was noted that the interest-free loan proposal would in theory be financially self-sufficient. The grant proposal would be more time bound, but the Council would look at ways in which funding for this could be made more sustainable.
- Modelling of spend had been difficult. Until the schemes were rolled out to the public it was hard to predict. The grant scheme was expected to be in big demand, and demand was also expected to be high for the loan scheme. Rollout of the programme was expected to be driven by demand rather than location, though should take up be low the council may need to take a geographical approach to some schemes.

Resolved

That it be recommended to Cabinet;

- 1. That the COVID-19 Interest Free Loans Eligibility Criteria to include debt as part of the criteria, rather than just loss of income, as at present.**
- 2. That the department organise a member development session to brief elected members of the Council on the new support funds and when it may be appropriate to refer people to them.**
- 3. That the department use the information it has available on vulnerable local people to proactively contact them to advise of the support on offer, and accompany this with a media campaign through social media and traditional media.**

4. That the department conduct a review of its debt collection processes in the light of the COVID-19 crisis, to ensure that the circumstances of vulnerable people adversely affected by the epidemic will be taken into account.

The Committee also made the following information requests:

1. Information on what had been spent under the Local Welfare Assistant (LWA) over the period of lockdown.
2. An update for the Committee on the work it can do to help people with no recourse to public funds.

10. **Any other urgent business**

None.

The meeting closed at 8.45 pm

M KELCHER
Chair