



MINUTES OF THE RESOURCES AND PUBLIC REALM SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
Held as an online virtual meeting on Wednesday 27 January 2021 at 6.00 pm

PRESENT: Councillor Mashari (Chair), Councillor Kansagra (Vice-Chair) and Councillors S Choudhary, Johnson, Kabir, Hassan, Long, Miller, Perrin and Shah

Also Present (in remote attendance): Councillors McLennan (Deputy Leader and Lead Member for Resources)

1. Apologies for absence and clarification of alternate members

Apologies were received from Councillor Mahmood.

2. Declarations of interests

None.

3. Deputations (if any)

None.

4. Minutes of the previous meeting

It was **RESOLVED** that the minutes of the last meeting held on 01 December 2020 be approved as a correct record.

5. Matters arising (if any)

None.

6. Any other urgent business

It was agreed that this item would be taken before item 6 on the agenda.

Alice Lester, Operational Director Regeneration, Growth and Employment introduced the additional item on the future of the borough's high streets. It was noted that the pandemic had led to an acceleration of changes to the reasons people visit and use high streets, with footfall dropping significantly and online sales rising. While this was the case across the country, local centres within the borough had been less affected than city centres due to its makeup of largely local businesses.

The Chair invited Andrew Dakers, Chief Executive at West London Business to give an update on some of the analysis West London Business had undertaken on the impact of the pandemic on West London's high streets and the potential for their recovery. He suggested that a number of key considerations would influence the mix of high streets post-pandemic. These included: an increased demand for

experiential retail offers; a shift towards environmental sustainability; competition between shopping centres and high streets; parking issues; affordable rents and rates and changes in spend due to changing working patterns. He then highlighted the importance of business support during the pandemic and the role it would play in the recovery, with particular reference made to the Additional Restrictions Grant.

The Chair then invited Matthew Jaffa, Senior External Affairs Manager at the Federation of Small Businesses to give an update on some of the concerns raised by small businesses during the pandemic. Unaffordable rents and rates were highlighted as a particular issue for local businesses, as well as spiralling levels of debt as a result of the loss of income. It was suggested that landlords and tenants needed to be incentivised to work more closely together to find innovative solutions to these issues. He also raised concerns over the proposed changes to permitted development rights over the forthcoming year, which he feared would result in the loss of local businesses. The importance of supporting local businesses to employ local residents during the recovery was also highlighted, with particular reference made to the Kickstart Scheme.

Councillor Tatler, Lead Member for Regeneration, Property and Planning then gave an update on the Council's approach to the future of the borough's high streets. It was noted that the it would look to support social and community spaces as well as retail spaces, recognising that importance of increased footfall for high streets. She then highlighted a range of actions the Council were taking to support high streets including: the meanwhile use of spaces; capital expenditure projects such as Harlesden Picture Place; ensuring local businesses form part of the Council's supply chain; partnership work with neighbouring local authorities and Town Centre Managers and Neighbourhood Management Teams. She also highlighted the support provided to local businesses throughout the pandemic such as business support grant funding.

The Committee was then invited to raise questions on the updates provided, which focused on a number of key areas as highlighted below:

- In response to a question from the Committee, it was noted that many high streets in the borough were vibrant and so there was no need for extra support. In comparison to other areas in the country Brent was deemed to be in a strong position. It was recognised, however, that there would be challenges ahead for high streets such as Brexit and the increase in online shopping. Members noted that nine town centres had been identified for extra support – Kilburn, Collindale, Burnt Oak, Willesden Green, Neasden, Church End, Harlesden, Ealing Road and Wembley.
- It was noted that officers were proactively working with landlords to the meanwhile use of vacant properties, and Wembley High Road was highlighted as a successful example of this.
- In response to a question regarding the appropriate use of office space, it was noted that the Council would look to work with landlords to ensure office spaces were being utilised efficiently. This was seen as particularly important as the borough recovers from the pandemic, and future work patterns and office usage begin to take shape. Members were assured that, as a result of an Article 4 direction across the borough, the Council had withdrawn the ability to convert office spaces for residential use.

- Regarding the actions that local authorities should be taking to support high streets, it was suggested that small businesses be supported to fill spaces on high streets, that local businesses form part of the Council's supply chain, that free parking be offered on high streets and that town centre managers continue to support businesses. It was also suggested that the Council lobby central government on issues relating to business support grants, permitted development rights, affordable rents and rates and the self-employment income support scheme.
- It was noted that high street spaces were often too expensive for voluntary and community sector organisations and as such local authorities should look to mitigate this. The meanwhile use of buildings was highlighted as one mitigation, as well as encouraging organisations to utilise markets before entering renting agreements.
- It was suggested that the Council look to apply for an Article 4 direction to withdraw the ability to convert retail spaces for residential use. The Committee was assured that this was something it would look into, but recognised that it would be a lengthy process.
- In response to a question regarding 15-minute neighbourhoods, it was explained that this policy aimed to transform neighbourhoods into connected and self-sufficient areas. It was a policy area the Council was looking to explore further, and it was recognised that it would promote its climate objectives and encourage residents to shop locally.
- The Committee was assured that the Council would look to complete its annual health check in the near future which would give it an insight into the current state of high streets. This would then inform actions on issues such as the mix of businesses and lengths of high streets.
- It was noted that the Council encouraged mixed-use and affordable workspaces within new developments in the borough, including on high streets. An example given was the Networks Home Development on Ealing Road, in which several artist studios were based.
- In response to a question regarding plans to encourage footfall on high streets, it was noted that the Council had identified a number of actions to do so such as the promotion of local transport links and the development of markets and community spaces.
- It was noted that rising rent levels was an ongoing issue for local businesses. It was suggested that the Council lobby central government to introduce rent controls and reform the rates system.

Resolved

That the following areas of improvement be noted:

- 1. To consider providing rain cover for the borough's high streets through Community Infrastructure Levy or Section 106 funding.**
- 2. To consider how the Council could facilitate consolidated ownership of high street spaces.**
- 3. To consider applying for an Article 4 direction to withdraw the ability to convert retail spaces for residential use.**
- 4. To consider the use of rent controls and rate reviews on the borough's high streets on a cross-party basis.**

5. To ensure the annual health check of the borough's high street is undertaken as soon as it is safe to do so.
6. To work alongside West London Business and the Federation of Small Businesses in lobbying central government on issues relating to business support grants, permitted development rights, affordable rents and rates and the self-employment income support scheme.

7. **Budget Scrutiny - Quarter 2 and Quarter 3 Financial Report 2020/21**

Councillor McLennan, Deputy Leader and Lead Member for Resources introduced a report on the Quarter 2 and Quarter 3 financial reports 2020/21, which formed part of the scrutiny of the Council's budget performance.

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 regarding 13 posts that had been held vacant for the rest of the year in the Children and Young People department, it was noted that these posts would be covered by existing staff until the department was in a position to recruit.
- It was noted that the major financial impact of the pandemic for the Community and Well-being department was the cost of procuring Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and distributing it free of charge to care providers. It was explained that this had been provided as the Council was better able to source and buy PPE than many care providers, and that this expenditure was expected to reduce as central government had announced that it would provide PPE at no cost to all care homes for the remainder of the financial year.
- Regarding the loss of income due to the pandemic, it was noted that central government had provided funding for income losses, but would not guarantee additional funding past the first quarter of the next financial year. Members were assured that the Council continued to lobby for additional funding and had forecasted future loss of income.
- It was noted that the overspend on the Dedicated Schools Grant was largely due to growing numbers of Education Health and Social Care plans (EHCPs). Members were assured that no child would be refused an EHCP, but it was recognised that the current level of central government was not enough to meet the growing demand.
- In response to a question regarding the Housing Revenue Account, it was noted that its operating reserve was currently less than desired. Mitigating action, such as re-scheduling major works and new build capital investments, would be considered if necessary.

8. **Budget Scrutiny Report**

The Budget Scrutiny Report, published as a supplementary agenda item, was noted.

9. **Digital Customer Services**

Councillor McLennan, as Deputy Leader and Lead Member for Resources introduced a report on how the customer access strand of the Brent Digital Strategy 2019-23 was being delivered and progress against it in light of the pandemic.

The Committee was then invited to raise questions on the report, which focused on a number of key areas as highlighted below:

- It was noted that areas in which digital exclusion was more prominent had been identified. Actions to ensure residents in these areas had more access to digital services were underway including closer partnership work, the use of Digital Champions, broadband and digital device access and signposting and triage.
- In response to a question from the Committee, it was noted that older people were more likely to be offline, lack digital skills and to have access to digital devices. It was recognised that there was a need to ensure older people understand the benefits of being online. The importance of involving family and friends in the process was noted, for example by using applications such as Zoom.
- It was noted that the Council's online platforms were reviewed to ensure accessibility on an ongoing basis. Much work had been undertaken over the past year to ensure online platforms met new government guidelines on accessibility, and accessibility audits had also been undertaken. This included the updating of online forms.
- The Committee were assured that the Council were looking at the ways in which online and telephone services were integrated with back office systems to ensure a more efficient service. This involved effective signposting, the development of online forms and procuring new back office applications. It was hoped that these would create a simple and holistic system.
- Regarding telephone answer rates, it was noted that answer rates were monitored and were generally high. In the cases in which there was no answer, investigations would be carried out to understand why.
- It was noted that a number of pilots were underway to support digital inclusion in the borough, for example through providing older and disabled residents with broadband, digital devices and digital training. The specific needs of each pilot group had been identified and the Council would work with its private and voluntary and community partners to measure the outcomes.
- In response to a question regarding internet access for pupil home learning, it was noted that the Council were putting additional arrangements in place for those residents who could not access Department for Education schemes. It was working alongside education providers to identify those children who were eligible.

10. **Annual Complaints Report 2019/20**

Councillor McLennan, as Deputy Leader and Lead Member for Resources introduced a report on complaints performance for the period April 2019 to March

2020, focusing on the nature of complaints and the learning they provided to inform the future approach to service improvement.

The Committee was then invited to raise questions on the report, which focused on a number of key areas as highlighted below:

- In relation to complaints received by the Complex Care team, it was noted that there had been a number of complaints from some families which had bordered on vexatious and needed to be managed. The Committee was assured that an update would be provided once action had been taken.
- It was noted that services were supported to learn from complaints, which provided an opportunity for these services to be improved and shaped by customer experience. Members were assured that teams were encouraged to take corrective actions when complaints were received. Recent changes to care assessments and the planning process were given as particular examples.
- It was noted that Stage 2 complaints had increased by 22% to 254 cases during 2019/20 compared with the previous year. The majority of this increase had been attributed to Housing Management Services. Members were assured that new measures to improve complaints handling within the service would be implemented.
- The Committee were assured that complaints were monitored for patterns in the types of issues raised. Should patterns become apparent, remedial action would be taken. It was suggested that Lead Members attend future meetings of the Committee to speak to complaints within their service.

Resolved

That the following area of improvement be noted:

- 1. To consider implementing a thematic review of complaints across departments.**

The Committee made the following information request:

- 1. Data on vexatious complaints received within the Children and Young People service.**

11. Forward Plan of Key Decisions

The Forward Plan of Key Decisions was noted and the following points highlighted:

- The draft version of the Meanwhile Use Strategy would be taken to Cabinet on 08 February 2021. It was noted that details of the new strategy would be made available before the meeting.
- The Fair Debt Recovery Policy would align with the recommendations of the Poverty Commission. It was noted that the policy would be taken to the Poverty Commission Sub-Group in February 2021.
- There would be an opportunity for the draft Borough Plan to be scrutinised by the Committee should it wish to do so. It was noted that the draft would be taken to Full Council in September.

12. **Scrutiny Recommendations Tracker**

The Scrutiny Recommendation Tracker table, which tracks the progress of recommendations made by the Committee, was noted.

It was agreed that the review date status column in the tracker be replaced by an implementation date status column.

The meeting closed at 8.00pm

R MASHARI
Chair