



Brent

MINUTES OF THE RESOURCES AND PUBLIC REALM SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Tuesday 1 December 2020 at 6.00 pm

PRESENT: Councillor Mashari, Councillor Kansagra and Councillors S Choudhary, Johnson, Kabir, Hassan, Long, Miller and Shah

Also Present: Councillors McLennan (Deputy Leader and Lead Member for Resources), Krupa Sheth (Lead Member for Environment), Southwood (Lead Member for Housing & Welfare Reform), Tatler (Lead Member for Regeneration, Property & Planning) and Stephens (Lead Member for Schools, Employment & Skills).

1. Apologies for absence and clarification of alternate members

Apologies were received from Councillors Mahmood and Perrin. Apologies were also received from Sandra Ademola and Shaheen Pathan (representatives of the Department for Work and Pensions).

2. Declarations of interests

None.

3. Deputations (if any)

None.

4. Minutes of the previous meeting

Resolved

That the minutes of the last meeting held on 08 October 2020 and the call-in meeting held on 23 September 2020 be approved as a correct record.

5. Matters arising (if any)

None.

6. Budget Scrutiny

Resolved

That a Budget Scrutiny Task Group be established with the following members:

- **Councillor Mashari – Chair**
- **Councillor Ketan Sheth – Vice-Chair**
- **Councillor Johnson**
- **Councillor Miller**
- **Councillor Hector**

- **Councillor Thakkar**
- **Councillor Kansagra**

And with the following terms of reference:

- i. **To consider the Cabinet’s budget proposals.**
- ii. **To receive evidence from Cabinet Members, senior departmental officers and any other relevant stakeholders, and**
- iii. **To agree a draft report to comment on the budget proposals for submission to the Resources and Public Realm Scrutiny Committee for ratification and submission to Cabinet.**

7. Employment and the COVID-19 epidemic in Brent

Prior to the introduction of the report, it was noted that there were no Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) representatives present at the meeting. It was suggested that the DWP be invited to an extraordinary meeting of the Committee which would be held as soon as possible. In addition, the Committee would write to the DWP to outline its line of questioning for the proposed meeting.

Councillor Stephens, Lead Member for Employment, Schools & Skills and Councillor Tatler, Lead Member for Regeneration, Property and Planning introduced a report on the council and partner response to assist Brent residents into employment in a the current labour market and to support businesses and town centres to adapt to the impacts of COVID-19.

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 had not put any additional funding into its support programmes for those seeking employment in Brent. Brent Works was funded largely through s106 contributions and Brent Starts was funded largely through the DWP, while other support projects had their own funding streams. The Committee was assured that both programmes were in a secure financial position and was able to maintain its service at its current level through its existing funding sources. The Council was committed to a partnership approach to employment within the borough, which was underpinned by its procurement strategy.
- It was noted that the Council had provided around 470 jobs to residents during the pandemic which had been achieved through close working relations with partner organisations. It had allocated £2 million in Neighbourhood Community Infrastructure Levy (NCIL) funding for areas disproportionately affected by COVID-19 and £1 million in employment support. The economic fallout of the pandemic had not yet been realised but the Committee was assured that the Council would continue to support residents into employment post-pandemic, with employment being a key priority of Brent Borough Plan.
- In response to a question from the Committee, it was noted that the Council did not have access to information regarding the amount of European Union (EU) funding the DWP had put towards employment in the borough. The

Committee was assured that the Council was doing its own work to survey the effects of Brexit and the pandemic on employers.

- It was also noted that there had been no assessments on the impact of Brexit on employment within the borough, although there had been national assessments. It was difficult to estimate the impact of Brexit on employment, and much would depend on whether or not a deal could be agreed with the EU. The furlough scheme had been extended until March and it was expected that it would therefore partially cover jobs lost due to Brexit in the short term.
- The Committee was assured that those with disabilities within the borough would have access to employment support from the Council. There were areas within the Brent Works programme that offered targeted support for those with disabilities, and staff were also employed to support those seeking employment benefits. Moreover, it supported apprenticeships for those with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs), was a Disability Confident employer and had committed to improving employment outcomes for those with disabilities in its poverty strategy.
- It was noted that while the Brent Works programme prioritised employment within the borough, it also sought to provide employment opportunities to residents with employers in neighbouring boroughs. The Council also hoped to encourage large employers to establish themselves within the borough by providing the necessary workspace and transport links to support them to do so.
- In response to a question from the Committee it was noted that employment support was available to all residents that needed it, including the traveller community. There were specific areas of the Council's employment offer that covered the traveller community, and it was suggested that it needed to take more of a proactive approach in making the traveller community aware of the support available to it.
- It was noted that town centre vacancy rates were calculated through business rates data and engagement with town centre managers and property owners.
- Regarding graduate employment within the borough, it was noted that the Council was looking to attract big employers to the borough which in turn would create employment opportunities for graduates. It was recognised that the borough had historically had high levels of low-paid employment, and increasing employment in growth sectors, protecting and procuring workspace and raising the average wage were seen as key priorities.
- It was suggested that the Council should ensure its support programmes were targeting disadvantaged communities by benchmarking their work against the characteristics and backgrounds of those that were placed into employment.
- It was noted that the Council had not received information on the number of the borough's businesses that had closed during the pandemic. It did carry out assessments such as business surveys, though such assessments should not be seen as representative samples. It was suggested that the Council work alongside Brent MPs to reiterate the importance of national government sharing this data with local authorities.
- In response to a question from the Committee, it was noted that the Council was looking to support local businesses to increase their online presence

and their ecommerce platform. This had been a focus before the pandemic and would continue to be a focus post-pandemic.

Resolved

That the following areas of improvement be noted:

- 1. That the Council considers a joint employment strategy with the DWP.**
- 2. That support for cooperative businesses be included in the Procurement Strategy.**
- 3. That the Council encourages local MPs to lobby central government for more detailed employment and business data sharing.**

The Committee made the following information requests:

- 1. A breakdown of the funding the DWP received from the EU to support their employment programmes.**
- 2. How the Council supports small and medium-sized businesses to trade as cooperatives.**
- 3. A breakdown of the number of jobs the Council had provided through its employment programmes to residents prior to the pandemic.**
- 4. A breakdown of the employment opportunities the Council has offered residents through its employment programmes inside and outside of the borough.**
- 5. How the Council supports minority outreach communities, in particular the traveller community, into employment.**
- 6. Feedback from business surveys undertaken to evaluate the impact of the pandemic on businesses and the self-employed.**

8. The Climate Emergency

Councillor Krupa Sheth, Lead Member for Resources, introduced a report on the draft Brent Climate Emergency Strategy 2021-2030. 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 worked with developers to ensure new buildings were climate friendly. While new buildings were typically built to be climate friendly, it was recognised that more needed to be done to encourage cleaner construction. Ensuring existing buildings were climate friendly was seen as a harder issue to solve, although work was underway to facilitate this.
- In response to a question from the Committee regarding ground source heat pumps, it was noted that there were constraints in using them in tower blocks. The Council was looking at test pilots to assess their usage in tower blocks in the near future.
- The Committee was assured the Brent Climate Emergency Strategy would be output and outcome focused. Once the strategy was finalised, the Council would look at how these would be assessed. It was looking to engage with its partners and the private sector to ensure its outcomes were deliverable and measurable.

- It was noted that the strategy would be funded largely by capital expenditure and grant funding. Most of its funding would be met with existing resources, although extra funding would be made available should it be needed.
- In response to a question from the Committee, it was noted that the financing of the strategy would go through several stages of scrutiny. It would be scrutinised as part of the overall budget in the coming weeks, and the Committee was assured it would be brought back to a future meeting once the strategy was agreed.
- It was noted that the Council was utilising a number of alternative energy sources including solar panels with private home owners, air source heat pumps through the Green Homes grant fund and energy generated from fish oil.
- The Council was keen to continue supporting those residents in the borough that were in fuel poverty. For example, it was in the process of conducting home energy visits for those households identified as vulnerable. This work was being supported through central government grant funding.
- In response to a question regarding pension divestment, it was noted that the market was very different to what it had been previously and that there were now more opportunities for low carbon investment. The Pension Fund Sub-Committee agreed to invest £50 million in the London CIV Infrastructure Fund in 2019, which would ensure 25% of the fund would be invested in renewable energy projects. It also agreed to invest £28 million in a low carbon equity fund in the same year, and was committed to exploring further investment options in this area. However, it was difficult to give a precise timescale for divestment.
- It was also noted that the Pension Fund Sub-Committee recognised that investing in companies that follow environmental, social and governance (ESG) factors produced long-term sustainable gains. The Sub-Committee recently agreed to use the BlackRock Equity Tracker which follows ESG factors.
- The Committee was assured that the Council would continue to work with its partners to increase the level of recycling in blocks of flats. This work had been underway before the pandemic and would soon be restarted. It was recognised that the level was currently well below what it would ideally be.
- In response to a question regarding food waste, it was recognised that more needed to be done to engage with residents as to the benefits of food recycling. The Council would also continue to promote national campaigns.

Resolved

That the following areas of improvement be noted:

- 1. That the Brent Climate Emergency Strategy includes clear outcomes that are measurable and deliverable.**
- 2. To consider the ways in which the Council can encourage cleaner construction and ensure its properties were energy efficient.**
- 3. To consider how the Council can engage with residents to encourage food recycling.**
- 4. To consider how the Council can engage with residents in blocks of flats to encourage recycling.**

5. **To consider how the Council could allocate funding for the delivery of the Brent Climate Emergency Strategy.**
6. **To consider devising a timetable for pension carbon divestment.**

The Committee made the following information requests:

1. **Whether climate friendly measures would be considered as part of i4B and FWH Asset Management Strategy.**
2. **Data on the potential loss of parking income resulting from any changes to parking policy.**

10. The Brent Poverty Commission Delivery Plan

Councillor Southwood, Lead Member for Housing & Welfare Reform and Councillor McLennan, Deputy Leader and Lead Member for Resources introduced a report on the delivery plans to take forward the implementation of the Poverty Commission recommendations. 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 there was flexibility within the delivery plan to engage with a range of stakeholders, even if that stakeholder had not been explicitly listed. It was suggested that the Council engages with trade union leaders to explore the ways in which they could help it deliver its aims.
- It was noted that i4B was working to capture opportunities to strengthen the borough's high streets through selective housing interventions, and that housing suppliers were increasingly looking to high streets for development opportunities. The Committee was assured that this would not contradict the Council's work to ensure suitable workspaces for businesses wishing to trade in the borough, and it would ensure the standards of such accommodation was high.
- In response to a question regarding credit unions, it was noted that the Council was working directly with a credit union operating within the borough and was in discussions to begin working with another. It was also exploring a payroll commitment on credit unions.
- It was noted that the Council had committed to alleviating period poverty within the borough and it was assured that consultative work was underway to establish the best means to do so.

Resolved

To note the Brent Poverty Commission delivery plans.

11. Authority to Award Contract for Stonebridge Annexe Refurbishment

The report to update the Committee on the status of the Stonebridge Annexe refurbishment works was noted.

12. Forward Plan of Key Decisions

The Forward Plan of Key Decisions for the December 2020 period was noted.

13. **Recommendations Tracker**

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

14. **Any other urgent business**

None.

The meeting closed at 8.00 pm

R MASHARI
Chair