



# LONDON BOROUGH OF BRENT

## MINUTES OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Tuesday, 9 February 2010 at 7.30 pm

PRESENT: Councillor Jones (Chair), Councillor Castle (Vice Chair) and Councillors Clues and Thomas

Also Present: Councillors Dunwell, John and Powney and Sneddon (Lead Member for Human Resources and Diversity and Local Democracy and Consultation)

Apologies were received from: Councillors Mistry

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

None declared.

### 2. **Minutes of the Previous Meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 8 December 2009**

RESOLVED:-

that the minutes of the meeting held on 8 December 2009 be received and approved as an accurate record.

### 3. **Matters Arising (if any)**

*Cricklewood Library Children's Centre Project and Archive Move*

Jonathan Treherne (Legal Services) read out a statement updating the Committee on the situation concerning Cricklewood Library. It was noted that All Souls College were to receive a detailed legal explanation of the Council's view with the intention of seeking an agreement to the Council's proposals. The statement confirmed that the Council did not think that the building should revert to the ownership of All Souls College if a Children's Centre was provided at the site with the library.

Councillor Castle sought clarification as to whether this issue could be discussed at Area Consultative Forum meetings. In response, Jonathan Treherne agreed that Legal Services would provide written advice to Councillor Castle on this matter.

## *Climate Change Final Task Group Report*

The Chair advised that the additional recommendation to the task group report agreed at the last meeting of this Committee, that environmental implications sections be included on all formal reports where relevant, was to be included in the task group's report when it was reported to the Executive in March 2010.

## *Overview and Scrutiny Committee Work Programme – Town Centre Regeneration Task Group*

The Chair advised that answers to questions concerning the Town Centre Regeneration Task Group were awaited.

### **4. Appointments to Sub-Committees (if any)**

None.

### **5. Joint Commissioning Registered Social Landlord Performance**

Tony Hirsch (Head of Policy and Performance – Strategy and Regeneration, Housing and Community Care) introduced the report which provided details of performance across a whole range of housing issues. He advised that it was difficult to make direct comparisons between performances of the Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) because of differences in methodology in the way performance data was collated. Tony Hirsch confirmed that the quality and quantity of information provided by partners had improved since the first report on this item and overall there had been an encouraging improvement in performance. Members noted that the Tenant Services Authority would become the regulator for all social housing providers on 1 April 2010. A key element of this change would be the creation of a set of new standards, whilst local standards were also to be agreed in consultation with tenants and the local authority. Local authorities were also required to provide annual reports to tenants each July.

Members agreed to Councillor Dunwell addressing the Committee. Councillor Dunwell enquired what tools were used to ensure that best value was being provided and how was this undertaken. He commented that there had been contrasting opinions between the RSLs, residents and the Safer Neighbourhood Team with regard to the extent of anti-social behaviour in Queensbury ward and he sought further explanation for this.

During discussion, Councillor Castle, in noting that each organisation provided its own performance information, enquired whether there had been attempts to cross reference the information with residents or tenants' associations and whether the Council liaised directly with them. He commented that a key priority of Brent Housing Partnership (BHP) was fire safety and he sought observations with regard to the importance of health and safety issues with other RSLs. Councillor Castle also spoke of the need to co-ordinate the length of leases, particularly for those involving families, as he had been made aware of situations where landlords had confirmed with RSLs that a lease was about to expire and tenants were subsequently given short notice to leave or had been issued eviction notices.

Councillor Thomas sought views on whether the right questions had been asked to obtain the performance information and queried why the issue of overcrowding had not been mentioned in the report. He noted that Fortunegate Community Housing Group were lagging in a number of areas, whilst there were also no figures available for tenant satisfaction and he sought an explanation for this. Councillor Thomas emphasised the importance of empowering tenants and suggested that all RSLs hold a conference inviting all tenants, as had been arranged a few years previously. Comments were also sought with regard to the effectiveness of Locata in finding tenants suitable housing and the extent of falling housing stock as a result of the recession.

Councillor Clues asked how the Standard Assessment Procedure (SAP) energy ratings compared with previous figures and what could be done to improve ratings. He also enquired if some housing associations had greater difficulty in achieving higher SAP ratings.

The Chair enquired if the type of questions used to form the performance framework under the Tenants Service Authority coming into effect from April 2010 would differ significantly from the present ones. She sought reasons for Fortunegate Community Housing Group's decline in performance in emergency repairs and what steps were in place to reverse this. Reasons why some RSLs had no reported incidences of anti-social behaviour was sought and also an explanation as to why Metropolitan Housing Trust had a relatively high number of such incidences in view of their small housing stock. Concern was expressed about a number of RSLs missing their re-letting of vacant properties targets and reasons were sought for this, including whether it could be partly attributable to Locata processing times taking longer. The Chair enquired what checks were undertaken on temporary accommodation, commenting that the quality level for such properties was sometimes low. Views on what the approximate proportion of housing were street properties was also sought.

Joe Chambers (Chief Executive, Fortunegate Community Housing Group) was invited to respond to some of the issues raised. He stated that although there was no specific explanation as why emergency repairs performance for Fortunegate Community Housing Group had dropped, that the repairs were carried out at a time the residents had requested in order to provide greater customer satisfaction. This may mean that in some cases the emergency repair had not been carried out within target times, however still at a time most convenient to the tenant. Members heard that a Fortunegate Community Housing Group priority was to ensure the repair was carried out the first time the property was visited. Joe Chambers added that under the new Tenant Services Authority regime starting on April 2010, there would be an increased focus on fulfilling the needs and preferences of tenants. The Committee noted that Fortunegate Community Housing Group had recently reviewed its re-letting policy and that there were only a small number of voids currently in its housing stock, whilst there were no street properties in its current housing stock. Joe Chambers advised that all RSLs were undertaking capital programme works and for some this would include work around energy consumption. Older stock would be required to meet modern housing eco standards and this was a more significant issue for RSLs with a greater proportion of older housing. Joe Chambers confirmed that all Fortunegate Housing Community Group properties had been risk-assessed and that staff

carried out daily inspections as part of their work schedule. Work programmes were set up on the basis of the findings of these inspections.

Chinyere Ugwu (Chief Executive, Hillside Housing Group) acknowledged that re-letting times could be quite high and this was partly attributable to the fact that re-letting would not be undertaken until the decanting process had been finalised. She confirmed that there were regular fire assessments and that staff received the appropriate training to undertake this.

Jeffrey Jansen (Policy and Information Manager – Strategy and Regeneration, Housing and Community Care) confirmed that each RSL compiled and verified their own performance figures, however if there appeared to be significant anomalies in these, RSLs would be asked to re-check. He advised Members that there was no remit for the Council to be able to cross-reference the figures provided and the Council did not presently liaise directly with tenants or residents associations. It was difficult to comment on why some RSLs had no recorded incidences of anti-social behaviour as they had compiled the figures.

Tony Hirsch advised that the focus on tenants' priorities under the new framework of the Tenants Service Authority would look at issues such as communication with tenants and residents' associations which was likely to be encouraged, however consultation was ongoing and the set of questions used to assess performance were yet to be drawn up. It was hoped that the Council would be able to test the information provided by RSLs. Members noted that the Council had records of all housing stock managed by the RSLs and in the case of street properties, these tended to be older and more likely to have defects such as excessive moisture. Tony Hirsch acknowledged that the state of temporary properties was sometimes cause for concern and he advised that any concerns about individual properties could be reported to the Council on Health and Safety grounds. It was noted that a number of other councils in London were similarly affected by this problem.

Maggie Rafalowicz (Assistant Director – Housing and Regeneration, Housing and Community Care) advised that the standards with regard to repairs were agreed on a West London basis about two years ago. Members heard that there was no information to suggest that any of the RSLs in Brent were in financial difficulties, however the present economic climate had reduced the number of new housing developments. In addition, the uncertainty of funding pending the General Election was a reason for RSLs to be cautious, however there were still some new developments being undertaken in Brent. Members were informed that a tour by coach of RSL sites in Brent could be arranged for them if they wished.

Members agreed to the Chair's request that a report providing a summary update of performance be provided during the summer of 2010 and that it include information on street properties.

RESOLVED:-

- (i) that the report on Performance Information on Joint Commissioning Registered Social Landlords be noted; and
- (ii) that a summary update be provided to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee at a meeting in the summer of 2010.

## 6. One Stop Service Redesign Project Update

Graham Ellis (Director of Business Transformation) introduced the report which considered how the One Stop Service would be provided in the long term. Graham Ellis explained that the One Stop Service Redesign Project had initially been part of the Customer Contact Transformation Programme, however this project was now part of the Reshaping Customer Contact Gold Project which included a comprehensive approach to improving all areas of customer service. Members heard that of the £479,00 identified for efficiency savings by 2011, £300,000 savings had already been achieved and the remaining £179,000 planned for achievement in 2010/11 was on schedule.

During discussion, Councillor Thomas acknowledged the need for changes to the One Stop Service, however he commented that he was not surprised that a proportion of customers wanted the Harlesden One Stop Service to remain open in its existing format. He suggested that the proposed sign posting to the relevant services might not always be understood by customers and he felt the underlying aim of a number of initiatives was to achieve savings. He felt that a number of difficulties needed to be overcome and he asked how the impact of the changes would be monitored. Councillor Thomas also suggested that a review of the changes be reported back to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Councillor Clues enquired what assurances could be given to meet the needs of vulnerable people who were more difficult to reach.

The Chair also enquired how the wishes of those customers responding with regard to the Harlesden One Stop Service be addressed. The Chair sought views with regard to possible redundancies and what training would be undertaken.

In response, Graham Ellis emphasised the need to reduce face to face customer contact and make greater use of other forms of communication. Members noted that there was presently a greater proportion of face to face customer contact in the south part of the Borough despite there being less provision of this type of customer contact there. Members heard that different measures were being considered in different areas and Graham Ellis acknowledged that in some cases face to face contact was more appropriate. He advised that achieving savings was an important objective of the project, however he felt that services could also be improved. These objectives could both be achieved by cutting unnecessary customer contact and he cited changes that had recently been made to Revenues and Benefits which had resulted in improved efficiency and customer service by looking at processes and reducing the number of times a customer needed to contact the service. With regard to redundancies, Graham Ellis acknowledged that there may be some as a result of the review, however these would be minimised by measures such as not replacing positions made vacant that had been occupied by agency staff. Relevant training programmes were already in place for staff with regard to changes and an emphasis would be placed in ensuring that each process worked from beginning to end. Members noted that proposals were in the process of being considered prior to a report being put to the Executive.

Members agreed that a future report providing a review of the changes be put before the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in approximately nine months time

and that it include details of how the service was provided to vulnerable people and how the service was performing in the south of the Borough.

RESOLVED:-

- (i) that the report on One Stop Service Redesign Project Update be noted; and
- (ii) that a report of a review of the changes be provided to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in approximately nine months time and that it include information on how the service is provided to vulnerable people and how the service is performing in the south of the Borough.

## **7. Neighbourhood Working January 2009 - January 2010**

Councillor Sneddon (Lead Member for Human Resources and Diversity and Local Democracy and Consultation) introduced the report and explained that there had been a broadening in scope and number of Neighbourhood Working projects since the last report to the Committee. There were also more examples of partnership working and some partnerships were still being developed.

Christine Collins (Neighbourhood Working Manager, Policy and Regeneration) then went into some detail concerning certain aspects of the report. Beginning with communications, she explained that there had been a number of activities to increase engagement, including:-

- Regular schedule of walkabouts with Members with a more targeted approach to ensure that contact was made with a larger number of people
- Increased contact in schools to improve engagement with young people who were usually under-represented in consultation responses
- Increased number of partnership days and events
- Neighbourhood Working Team participation at festivals and events over summer and also at Eid and Diwali celebrations to increase engagement with Asian communities who had been under-represented in consultation responses
- Team attendance at community groups and Tenants and Residents' Associations meetings
- Working closely with the Consultation Team to develop ways to make Area Consultative Forums (ACFs) more interactive and representative, including the piloting of a ward-based approach at the November 2009 meeting of the Wembley ACF where for part of the meeting it was split into small ward groups, each chaired by a ward member
- Continuation of Neighbourhood Bulletins
- Since April 2009, a quarterly update provided for internal colleagues

Christine Collins then outlined some of the challenges facing Neighbourhood Working. Members heard that each Neighbourhood Working Co-ordinator was working in five wards since April 2009, meaning there was less time for each ward and therefore less time for project development. The Team were considering ways to encourage service area colleagues to take more responsibility for project development and management. Christine Collins advised that although Members and officers might have certain issues they wanted addressed through Neighbourhood Working, in some instances these would not necessarily fall within

its scope. For example, they may not meet the priorities set by ward members or it was more appropriate that they be met by another budget. Christine Collins stressed that although it was important that Neighbourhood Working was member led, it needed to operate within a robust legal and procedural framework. Although the success of individual projects could be measured, it was not yet possible to identify major long term improvements to the way services were delivered through Neighbourhood Working and this would be measured through service reviews. Christine Collins also advised of the need to consider different ways of working in 2010/11 in light of delay to when funds would be allocated because of the Elections. It was suggested that members could be assisted by choosing from a shopping list of costed projects based on identified resident priorities. However, Members would still have the opportunity to include their own ideas and a problem-solving approach to individual issues would continue.

With the agreement of the Chair, Councillor Dunwell addressed the Committee. He commented that the splitting of ACFs into small ward groups had also been tried at a meeting of the Kingsbury and Kenton ACF some time ago. He stressed that Neighbourhood Working should continue to be member led.

During discussion, Councillor Clues also emphasised the need for Neighbourhood Working to continue to be member driven. Councillor Thomas commented that members should be proactive in their role and he felt that the shopping list suggestion could detract from this. He suggested that there be an annual report of Neighbourhood Working sent to all councillors and that it include a breakdown of spending for each ward. He felt that where wards were represented by councillors from more than one political group, more careful consideration was needed with regard to Neighbourhood Working activities.

The Chair suggested that projects identified for a ward that were yet to be undertaken could be considered for 2010/11. She sought clarification with regard to a Neighbourhood Working annual report as suggested by Councillor Thomas. The Chair also enquired if the Wembley ACF splitting the meeting by wards arrangement would be tried at other ACF meetings.

In reply, Councillor Sneddon agreed that it was important that Neighbourhood Working was member led and he stated that there were a number of other ways as well as the shopping list suggestion that were being considered.

Christine Collins advised that the shopping list idea had been suggested to help members decide on priorities and was also useful as it included costings. In addition, in some wards members sometimes sought inspiration for ideas and asked for details of projects in other wards. Members heard that the Wembley ACF splitting of the meeting by wards arrangement would be considered for other ACF meetings. Christine Collins confirmed that an annual report on Neighbourhood Working could be distributed to all councillors in June of each year and she stated that an update on budget spending could be provided for information at the March meeting of the Committee and this was agreed by Members.

Cathy Tyson added that because of the rolling programme nature of Neighbourhood Working, it would be difficult to provide a comparison of spending by ward. She advised the Committee that the shopping list suggestion was not put

forward as a primary way of working and that it could be used at a later stage if there was difficulty in deciding on projects or if there were funds remaining in a budget before the end of a financial year.

RESOLVED:-

- (i) that the report on Neighbourhood Working January 2009 – January 2010 be noted; and
- (ii) that an update on budget spending on Neighbourhood Working be circulated to Members.

## **8. Services for Women In and Exiting Prostitution**

Councillor John, Chair of the Services for Women In and Exiting Prostitution Task Group introduced the report. She began by explaining that the task group had been set up following the publication of Eaves POPPY Project's Big Brothel – A survey of the off-street sex industry in London. The task group had covered many issues and because of the complexities involved, it had been working for over a year. Although the police did not regard prostitution as a high priority issue, many women who engaged in prostitution faced very difficult situations and this could involve coercion, drugs and alcohol dependency, trafficking and internet grooming. Members heard that overall, the vast majority of women had not gone into prostitution as a lifestyle choice. Councillor John informed Members that the task group had been in contact and visited a number of organisations, including Safe Exit, the Eaves POPPY Project, the Metropolitan Police Clubs and Vice, the Suffolk Constabulary, Make a Change Ipswich, Archant London and the Council's Environmental Health.

Councillor John continued that the possible use of Wembley Stadium during the 2012 Olympics would mean a likely increase in prostitution activities in the local area and also an increase in organised crime, including trafficking. She then circulated to Members copies of sex industry advertisements that had appeared in a local Brent newspaper. One of the recommendations from the task group had included that Brent local newspapers be encouraged not to include any pictures or any reference to age or ethnicity in advertisements relating to the sex industry and that Brent local newspapers agree to carry a prevention and deterrent advertisement next to sex industry advertisements. Another issue that needed to be addressed was demand and more research as to why men chose to visit prostitutes. More research into the extent of prostitution in Brent was also required and Councillor John circulated a map of known brothels in Brent. Councillor John commented that those police who the task group had worked with had made significant contributions and that the work was supported by Mark Toland, the Borough Commander and the Eaves POPPY Project. She asked that the Council continue working with its partners to pursue this issue and Members were also encouraged to support continuation of this work. Councillor John then drew Members' attention to the task group's recommendations as set out in the report.

Members agreed to a request from Councillor Dunwell to address the Committee. He suggested that a page be placed in Brent Magazine providing information and useful contact numbers to those wishing to escape prostitution.



During discussion, Councillor Thomas suggested that the work of the task group be referred to Brent's Local Strategic Partners (LSP). He commented that a possible stumbling block to one of the task group's aims was that some local newspapers received a significant proportion of income from sex industry advertisements. He also enquired if all London boroughs involved in the 2012 Olympics would be meeting to discuss ways of addressing the likely increase in prostitution during this time. Councillor Clues, a member of the task group, felt that it had addressed a very important issue and the task group had worked effectively with its partners. He stressed the need to reinforce the message to the Executive how important it was that this issue be tackled and that it underpinned a number of factors that needed to be looked at.

The Chair also welcomed the work undertaken by the task group and advised that the recommendations to the Executive would be tracked, with a follow-up report due to go back to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee within the next six months. She commented that any future progress also depended on the Council's partners and she enquired how this would be taken forward and whether this would be considered by the Crime Prevention Strategy Group. She also asked how the recommendations with regard to Brent's local newspapers would be progressed.

In reply, Councillor John advised Members that local newspapers had guidelines in place with regard to sex industry advertisements, however it was important that newspapers be encouraged to follow their own guidelines and she suggested that the Crime Prevention Group could play a role in ensuring this. It was noted that the task group had met with organisations involved in the 2012 Olympics and one of their recommendations was that the Council and partners continue the work started by the task group.

Jacqueline Casson (Senior Policy Officer, Policy and Regeneration Unit) advised that Crime Prevention Group, as part of the LSP, had discussed the report and endorsed the recommendations. Cathy Tyson (Assistant Director – Policy, Policy and Regeneration Unit) added that the task group report could also be sent to the LSP Executive for information.

Members then endorsed the recommendations of the task group and agreed that an extra recommendation be added to include that a notice be placed in Brent Magazine providing information and useful contact numbers to those wishing to exit prostitution.

RESOLVED:-

- (i) that the Services for Women In and Exiting Prostitution task group report be noted;
- (ii) that the Services for Women In and Exiting Prostitution task group recommendations be agreed and to include an additional recommendation that a notice be placed in Brent Magazine providing information and useful contact numbers to those wishing to exit prostitution; and
- (iii) that the report be passed to the Executive for approval.

## **9. Strengthening Local Democracy Task Group**

Members had before them a scoping report on the Strengthening Local Democracy Task Group. Members then agreed to the recommendations in the report.

RESOLVED:-

- (i) that the Strengthening Local Democracy Task Group scoping document, as set out in appendix one of the report, be agreed; and
- (ii) that it be agreed that work on the Task Group start at the next municipal year, 2010/11

## **10. Tubbs Road Councillor Call for Action**

Councillor Powney was invited to update the Committee with regard to the Tubbs Road councillor call for action. In noting the decisions made by the Highways Committee on 19 January 2010, Councillor Powney added that Transportation officers had since met with the local residents association and there had been progress with regard to the review of signage and informing satellite navigation companies of the narrowness of Tubbs Road. Members noted that residents of Furness Road were pleased that the possibility of banning right hand turns out of their road into the High Road was being considered. Councillor Powney enquired when Transportation officers would provide an update of the scoping of the Harlesden Area Based Scheme to Members.

In reply, Andrew Davies (Policy and Performance Officer, Policy and Regeneration) stated that he would liaise with Transportation Unit as to when the scoping update would be provided to this Committee in the next municipal year. The Committee also agreed to follow up its recommendations on Tubbs Road in the summer of 2010.

## **11. Willesden Junction Station Councillor Call for Action Request**

Councillor Powney who had requested the councillor call for action, was invited to address the Committee. He referred Members to his main concerns in the report, which included:-

- The poor and dangerous state of Station Approach
- Underuse of Hythe Road public footpath
- Poor management of land around the station leading to environmental health issues and lack of visual amenity.
- Poor maintenance of Harrow Road footpath
- Poor signage

Councillor Powney explained that the reasons for the poor state of Willesden Junction Station and the area around it could partly be attributable to the site occupying land in three London boroughs - Brent, Ealing and Hammersmith and Fulham, and because of a lack of clarity as to who owned particular areas of the site. This included Station Approach, which Councillor Powney understood was likely to be owned by Network Rail, however no response from the company had

been received despite repeated requests. He suggested that the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham (LBHF) be approached with a view to setting up a joint task group to look into this matter further and that other organisations such as Network Rail, London Overground and Transport for London (TfL) be requested to attend a meeting and provide an explanation of the poor state of the area and agree what action needed to be taken.

During discussion, Councillor Thomas commented that the issue could be pursued through both this Committee and LBHF's Overview and Scrutiny Committee and he asked whether funding issues were precluding Neighbourhood Working from taking action. Councillor Clues felt there was some value in taking joint action with LBHF, however he did not think it was necessary to be pursued through the Overview and Scrutiny Committees.

The Chair commented that she understood that LBHF did not operate task groups, however she agreed that it would be useful for LBHF to be involved. Members then agreed to her suggestion that ways of working with LBHF be considered to pursue this issue, that Environmental Services approach Network Rail to ascertain if they own Station Approach and that Neighbourhood Working be asked to investigate the possibility of taking action.

RESOLVED:-

- (i) that Andrew Davies, Policy and Performance Officer, approach the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham to see if their Overview and Scrutiny Committee would be prepared to look at ways of improving the area in and around Willesden Junction Station;
- (ii) that the Executive agree that Environmental Services be requested to approach Network Rail to ascertain whether Network Rail own Station Approach; and
- (iii) that the Executive agree that the Neighbourhood Working Team be asked to consider taking action to assist in improving the area in and around Willesden Junction Station.

## **12. Overview and Scrutiny Committee Work Programme**

Members noted the Overview and Scrutiny Committee Work Programme. The Chair added that Members would be visiting learning disabilities day centres in the Borough on 23 February 2010.

## **13. Date of Next Meeting**

It was noted that the next meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee would take place on Tuesday, 23 March 2010 at 7.30 pm.

## **14. Any Other Urgent Business**

None.

The meeting ended at 9.55 pm.

L. JONES  
Chair