



MINUTES OF THE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Monday 3 November 2014 at 7.00 pm

PRESENT: Councillor A Choudry (Chair), Councillor Colwill (Vice-Chair) and Councillors Allie, Daly, Oladapo and Southwood, together with Mr Alloysius Frederick and Dr J Levison

Also Present: Councillors S Choudhary, Harrison, Hector, Hossain, Jones, Mashari (Lead Member for Employment and Skills), Pavey (Deputy Leader of the Council) and Perrin.

Apologies were received from: Councillors Mitchell Murray and Van Kalwala, Co-opted Members Ms Christine Cargill and Mrs Hawra Imame and appointed observers Jenny Cooper, Chrissy Jolinon and Lesley Gouldbourne

1. Declarations of interests

None declared.

2. Minutes of the previous meeting held on 1 October 2014

RESOLVED:-

that the minutes of the previous meeting held on 1 October 2014 be approved as an accurate record of the meeting.

3. Matters arising

None.

4. Employment, Skills and Enterprise Strategy consultation

Jon Lloyd-Owen (Operational Director – Housing and Employment, Regeneration and Growth) delivered the first part of the presentation on the employment, skills and enterprise strategy consultation. He began by referring to the consultation plan that involved specific dialogue with key stakeholders, including businesses, strategic stakeholders such as the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), the College of North West London (CNWL), voluntary community services and with local residents through the Borough Plan. Although the consultation had formally concluded, there were still opportunities to provide further feedback with regard to the strategy. Jon Lloyd-Owen described the local demographics of the borough, which had experienced an 18% rise in working population since 2003, well above the 6.5% average nationally. He referred members to the Job Seeker Allowance claims figures by ward and also adult qualification levels, which had seen significant improvements recently. Jon Lloyd-Owen advised that both national and local research indicated that there was a mismatch between skills provision and market needs and it was estimated that over 50% of jobs would require a degree by 2036

and only 5% would require no formal qualifications. Members noted job density and employment by sector comparisons between Brent and the London and national average and also the fact that Brent's average gross median earnings were both below the London average and that of the neighbouring borough of Ealing, Harrow, Hillingdon and Hounslow. Jon Lloyd-Owen concluded by advising that employment levels were below the London average and unemployment was particularly high in some wards and in some cases were double the borough average. There was also a lower than average jobs per population and earnings compared to the London average, with the service sector providing a quarter of the borough's employment. Jon Lloyd-Owen added that although qualification levels were improving, there were still some significant qualification and skills issues in some wards. In addition, although the overall picture was improving across the borough in terms of employment, skills and earnings, there were still pockets of inequality at both ward and neighbourhood level.

Shomsia Ali (Head of Employment and Enterprise, Regeneration and Growth) then described the draft strategy and its emerging objectives and outcomes. She explained that a 20 year vision oversaw the strategy which addressed the next five years and contained five draft strategic objectives and associated desired outcomes, the objectives being:

- To ensure skills provision is informed by employers and the labour market
- To reduce inequality by reducing economic and social polarisation in the borough's most deprived neighbourhoods and amongst residents most in need
- To reduce poverty through employment and progression in work
- The council to influence and shape national programmes and agendas delivered locally
- To promote economic growth through regeneration and increasing opportunities for local businesses

Members noted the desired outcomes for each strategic objective and Shomsia Ali then referred to the consultation response outcomes to each strategic objective and as a result of the feedback received, a consultation response document was being produced. The next steps included developing the full strategy, including a equalities impact assessment, developing a work in progress action plan, including continual discussions to inform the action plan, and an Employment Summit would be arranged to monitor progress.

During members' discussions, an explanation and reasons as to what made Brent different to other London boroughs in terms of the challenges to overcome in increasing employment was sought. A member asked how many of the officers involved in producing the report lived in the borough. She felt that the consultation on the strategy was narrow in scope and was a wider consultation planned. She also felt that the strategy had not sufficiently highlighted the borough's strengths. Furthermore, she felt that the consultation document lacked details of important specific factors, such as health and creative indicators and she felt that further work was needed both in consultation and in developing the strategy. Another member enquired whether the strategy was specifically for Brent only or whether there was also work being undertaken with other boroughs. He also stated that as English was not the first language for a

number of residents in the borough, clear communication of the strategy was especially important and efforts needed to be made to reach to a wider audience. He also asked what percentage of staff lived in the borough.

A member asked if linking employment to allocation of housing was a new initiative and he sought clarification as to whether a renewal of tenancy for council housing was dependent on being in employment. He also enquired what formal indicators would be monitored to measure the success of the strategy. Another member commented that schools were under increasing pressure with rising pupil numbers and he asked why there was no mention of where and when new schools would be built. He enquired what steps were being taken to ensure every child received a good education in the borough and would not be required to spend excessive time travelling to a school far from their home. It was also queried whether there had been any consultation with the Brent Youth Parliament about the strategy. Another member asked whether engagement with local businesses was satisfactory or could more be done, including efforts to attract businesses to the borough using their style of language and setting out the reasons why Brent should be the borough of choice for them. She also asked if the local DWP provision could do more to help residents into employment.

In response to the issues raised, Shomsia Ali advised that Brent was quite different from its neighbouring boroughs in that essentially it was an outer London borough with inner London borough issues. There were also Brent specific issues and there were a number of people who were attracted to live in the borough for a number of reasons. Shomsia Ali acknowledged that there were a number of positive features about the borough. She confirmed that she had produced the consultation report and lived outside of the borough and HR could provide figures for the percentage of staff who lived in Brent. She advised that the consultation report was a summary of the findings to date and so would not include all details on specific indicators. Members heard that work was undertaken with other London boroughs through organisations such as London Councils and the West London Alliance where ideas could be shared. The borough was a very diverse one and English for Speakers with other Languages (ESOL) providers and organisations like Brent Start provided an important link between those searching for work and potential employers. Shomsia Ali stated that engagement with local businesses had been quite poor in the past and this needed to be undertaken more extensively. The creation of the Brent Business Hub was addressing this issue and was already starting to forge more effective engagement and efforts were being focused in working in partnership with local business providers. Members noted that the Work Programme was nationally prescribed and local Jobcentre Plus offices could not intervene in how it operated. Shomsia Ali added that there was now more effective working with DWP, with some staff from both organisations co-locating. Members also heard that the Brent Youth Parliament 's key theme for this year was employment and one of the measures being considered was how a 'skills passport' could be introduced. Shomsia Ali confirmed that the Brent Youth Parliament had been consulted about the strategy.

Jon Lloyd-Owen advised that the south of the borough had seen significant demographic changes as the proximity to central London with excellent transport links attracted residents on higher incomes, resulting in higher rents.

Jon Lloyd-Owen acknowledged that in some instances, focusing on areas doing less well in the borough meant that some positive features were neglected and efforts needed to be made in highlighting the positives and building on them. He advised that the consultation had engaged widely and there had not been a general public consultation on the strategy as such exercises had not generated a particularly large response in the past. Efforts would be made to obtain feedback from any groups prepared to do so and focus groups were also providing valuable feedback. Members also heard that a consultation was currently underway in respect of the Borough Plan. Jon Lloyd-Owen advised that the employment strategy was being developed in parallel with the housing strategy, which sets out the importance of incentivising and encouraging residents to obtain employment.

Cathy Tyson (Head of Policy and Scrutiny, Assistant Chief Executive's Service) added that any resident, as well as focus groups, had the opportunity to contribute to the Borough Plan through the call for evidence. Focus groups were specifically set up to ensure that they were representative and residents also had the opportunity to provide feedback through the Residents' Attitude Survey.

Councillor Mashari (Lead Member for Employment and Skills) advised that this was the first employment strategy that the council had attempted and so it was starting from afresh. An open consultation had been undertaken as it was important that it was not council led and the focus group meetings were providing high quality dialogue and feedback. In respect of the links between the employment strategy and the housing strategy, future services would be more targeted. Councillor Mashari advised that the council could not build new schools unless they were academies, however the strategy was looking at building links between businesses and schools and the school's building programme was not part of the strategy's remit.

The Chair acknowledged the substantial work that had been undertaken in developing the strategy and the progress made so far. He requested that a progress report on the strategy be presented to the committee in two to three months' time.

5. Overall impact of the Benefit Cap in Brent after one year of implementation

The Chair stated that as well as a presentation on the Overall Benefit Cap, Brent Citizens Advice Bureau had also been invited to the meeting to provide details of the typical issues they faced and how they dealt with them and the kind of customers that were visiting them.

David Oates (Head of Customer Service and Benefits, Regeneration and Growth) then gave a presentation on the impact of the Overall Benefit Cap (OBC) in Brent. He advised members that the OBC had been introduced in the borough in August and September 2013 and that it limited the total amount of welfare benefits for most working age claimants, with only some limited exemptions in respect of the Disability Living Allowance (DLA), Personal Independence Payment (PIP) and Working Tax Credit. Members noted that there had been 2,322 new OBC cases as of 31 August 2014, with just under 50% receiving a benefit cap of up to £50 per week. Some 488 customers had advised that they were addressing the shortfall

themselves, and a further 1,068 had fully resolved their situation, of which 48% were achieving this through employment, which was a positive outcome. David Oates advised that temporary accommodation and rents were comparatively high in the borough and this significantly impacted on customers and some had re-housed or even moved out of the borough altogether to address the shortfall. In respect of family status, members noted that the largest group of new OBC cases where caps were applied were single parents and these made up over 53% of new cases alone. Single claimants were less likely to be capped as they were likely to be living in smaller properties and so entitled to less benefits. Almost 50% of households meeting the shortfall themselves were lone parents, and of the cases resolved through employment, 57% were lone parents and 38% couples with dependents. In terms of ethnicity, black ethnic groups were most affected with 38% constituting new OBC cases and 48% of those capped by £250 or more per week being from this group. The committee heard that 42% of the black minority ethnic group resolved the shortfall through employment and 41% through relocation.

Jacqueline Carr (Chief Executive, Brent Citizens Advice Bureau) then addressed the committee. She advised that the partnership between Brent Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) and the council was working well. Plans had been devised by the two organisations, and Brent CAB was able to make contact with customers who had been impacted upon as a result of the DWP monthly report. However, an area that Brent CAB was struggling with was the additional demand placed on it as a result of the OBC as Brent CAB did not have sufficient resources to deal with the number of customers that were now approaching them for advice. Jacqueline Carr advised that most enquiries concerned welfare reforms in general and their impact on subject areas such as housing. Members heard that there had been a 70% increase in welfare benefit enquiries.

During members' discussion, it was asked whether Brent CAB felt that the council was listening to their concerns because of the introduction of the OBC. In respect of the 21% of OBC cases being resolved through moving to alternative accommodation, clarification was sought as to the number of cases that were resolved within the borough and outside the borough and the number receiving council assistance to make these moves and what was meant by being resolved under 'other'. A further explanation in respect of DLA customers being exempt from a cap was also requested and it was asked whether the greatest risk to residents posed by the OBC was in respect of housing and what impact did rising rents have in respect of the cap. It was commented that in future a report rather than a presentation on this item would be preferable. Another member asked if any lessons had been learnt since the OBC had been introduced and had there been any surprising developments. She also asked if there were any strategic issues that needed consideration in the future. In respect of resource issues, comments were sought about how significant these were and what were the expectations in the medium term. A question was raised as to where customers who moved out of the borough were moving to. A member asked if the council was able to assist Brent CAB in dealing with the increased demand that they were struggling to cope with and was there any help for single under 35 year olds on Benefits.

In reply to the issues raised, David Oates advised that although customers would be encouraged to seek employment to resolve shortfalls in respect of OBC, if this was not possible then they may consider moving to alternative accommodation and he would provide Councillor Daly with the number of customers both re-housed in

the borough and outside of the borough and details of whether they were assisted by the council. David Oates explained that resolved OBC cases under 'other' could be due to a range of technical issues and he would provide more details of such scenarios. Members heard that some DLA customers may be exempt from being capped and the council would advise them if this was the case. In terms of future challenges, David Oates advised that ongoing demand would continue to stretch resources and although temporary funding arrangements were in place, new OBC cases would continue to come in as the OBC was now an established part of the Benefits scheme. There was a need to closely monitor demand and although some lessons had been learnt, there would be a tight squeeze on resources and this would be an issue.

David Oates advised that there had been some surprise that the impact of the OBC had been less than expected in terms of numbers affected. The difficulties that were being experienced were less of a surprise and this had been helped by better working between teams and agencies. David Oates added that the introduction of Universal Credit would bring about significant changes that would be outside of the council's control as this would be undertaken by DWP. The council would need to build a complimentary offer and consider a different delivery model too. Members heard that the council would try and give a clear a picture as possible to single under 35 year olds concerning their benefits entitlements. David Oates confirmed that customers were most affected by the OBC in terms of housing as the cap was applied to their Housing Benefit. The rising rents in the borough also meant that properties were becoming increasingly inaccessible to those on Benefits.

Jacqueline Carr stated that local authorities were at the forefront of implementing the OBC and it was important that they supported those affected by the changes. Brent CAB was funded to provide advice to customers and a member of staff had been placed in the council's Benefits and Customer Services Team until at least 31 December 2014. Jacqueline Carr advised that Brent CAB had handled around 450 outcomes over the last year and the continual demand was difficult to cope with. She suggested that there would be an increasing number of customers visiting Benefits and Customer Services, councillor surgeries and Brent CAB because of the changes in Benefits. The committee heard that Brent CAB often experienced long queues long before their offices opened. Jacqueline Carr then explained the process by which Brent CAB would advise customers, which would consist of an initial assessment before determining whether the case would be dealt with directly by Brent CAB, or to signpost the customer to the appropriate agency. A lot of the queries Brent CAB received were in relation to debt and housing and welfare reforms had affected many of their customers. The committee also heard that rising rents in the borough were placing pressures on customers.

Councillor Mashari advised that the council was doing all it could to keep customers in the borough. There were 19 capped cases that were due to move out of the borough and each had been provided with the appropriate contacts in respect of seeking employment. Councillor Mashari added there needed to be greater engagement with a range of agencies to help customers. She also advised that there was a Member Development Programme session on Revenues and Benefits taking place on 13 November 2014.

The Chair explained that this item had been requested shortly before the meeting and this is why a presentation had been given. He emphasised the importance of

continuing to engage with residents about welfare reforms and he requested that the committee receive regular updates on this issue.

6. Promoting electoral engagement (IER) task group

The Chair invited Councillor Nerva, Chair of the promoting electoral engagement (IER) task group to present the interim report. Councillor Nerva began by stating that the final report was due to go to the committee on 26 November and he thanked members of the task group and officers for the work done to date. He stated that the task group had covered a lot of ground since it had been set up and had worked with a number of organisations, including Brent Housing Partnership and voluntary sector organisations and a meeting with health professionals was due to take place later in November in respect of the role GP registers could make in helping to ensure residents were on the electoral register. Councillor Nerva emphasised the importance of voting, however he commented some residents were indifferent to the issue and Brent, along with a number of other London boroughs, had historically been underrepresented. The task group's role sought to address this issue, particularly in the light of the introduction of individual electoral registration (IER). Furthermore, residents needed to be informed that failing to appear on the electoral register could affect them in a number of other ways, such as difficulty in obtaining credit. Councillor Nerva advised that Scotland had achieved a registration rate of 97%, and this should be Brent's too, however it would have to work in a very different way than previously to achieve this because of the challenges posed by IER. Members heard that local voluntary organisations and CVS Brent had offered to work with Electoral Services to help the harder to reach in the community. It was also recommended that new residents to the borough receive details of signing up to IER in a welcome pack, whilst local councillors could also play a role in highlighting the importance of registering.

Councillor Nerva advised that some of the findings of the task group had been surprising, including the fact that the group most likely to not be registered were the 20 to 30 year olds and efforts to encourage this group to register needed to be undertaken, such as informing them that they can register on-line and that they would need to know their national insurance number. Councillor Nerva concluded by stating that the borough was one of the first local authorities to undertake scrutiny on electoral registration and IER and the findings could also prove helpful to other local authorities. The final report may also identify where electoral registration was low for a particular ward or polling district, or even within a polling district, with the help of geographic information system (GIS).

With the approval of the Chair, a member of the public addressed the committee. The member of the public stated that it was the public duty of residents to ensure that they were on the electoral register and that it should be made clear that they had the option to opt out of the edited public register if they were worried about being contacted by third party organisations.

Councillor Pavey (Deputy Leader of the Council) welcomed the report and the partnership led approach taken. He felt that electoral registration would increase through working with the voluntary sector and community groups, as well as schemes such as private landlord licensing.

During discussion, it was remarked that certain groups in the community were hard to engage with and this challenge would require creative solutions. However, the interim report gave early positive indicators and the final report was keenly awaited. Another member commented that there were a number of residential care homes and residents with learning disabilities in the borough and she enquired what steps were being taken to ensure that they were registered. In addition, she asked if electoral registration was promoted in sixth form colleges and those at school who were between 16 to 18 years old, whilst there was also a role for political parties to play in encouraging registration. It was queried whether suggestions to promote electoral registration and IER could also be given by other councillors as well as members of the committee.

In reply, Councillor Nerva advised that Brent Mencap had provided feedback to the task group and citizenship issues were part of client's care plans. He stated that political parties could participate in promoting electoral registration and they would benefit from being given advice on what they would be permitted to do. He stated that IER was not a one off event and that practical engagement to emphasise the importance of registering would need to continue. Councillor Nerva welcomed any further suggestions for the final report from the committee and any other councillor.

Christopher Young (Senior Policy Officer, Assistant Chief Executive's Service) advised that a data matching exercise comparing address details held by Adult Social Care for those with learning disabilities had surprisingly revealed that such residents were more likely than the general population to be registered to vote, with 79% registered compared to 67.7% amongst the general population. He also confirmed that the Brent Youth Parliament was working with schools and sixth form colleges in advising them of the importance of being on the electoral register.

Thomas Cattermole (Head of Executive and Member Services, Legal and Procurement) advised that guidance for members in respect of promoting electoral registration and IER to residents was being developed and a Member Development Programme session on IER was taking place in December 2014.

Sean O'Sullivan (Electoral Services Manager, Legal and Procurement) advised that there were strong links with the accommodation managers of university halls of residence in the borough and this was used to help promote electoral registration amongst students.

The Chair welcomed the interim report and confirmed that the final report would be considered at the next committee meeting on 26 November 2014.

7. Scrutiny Committee forward plan

The Chair advised that Cathy Tyson would be circulating a revised Scrutiny Committee forward plan to members for comments.

8. Any other urgent business

None.

The meeting closed at 9.40 pm

A CHOUDRY
Chair