

MINUTES OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
9 July 2009 at 7.30 pm

PRESENT: Councillor Jones (Chair), and Councillors John (for Thomas), Mistry, Motley (for Leaman) and R Moher.

ALSO PRESENT: Councillor Blackman (Deputy Leader of the Council) and Councillors Butt and Dunwell.

Apologies for absence were given on behalf of Councillors H B Patel, Castle, Leaman and Thomas.

1. Declarations of Personal and Prejudicial Interests

None declared.

2. Minutes of Previous Meetings

RESOLVED:

that the minutes of the meetings held on 18 May 2009 and 27 May 2009 be approved as accurate records.

3. Matters Arising

None.

4. Appointments to Sub-Committees

None

5. Deputations

Mr Chambers and Mr Sayers were given permission by the committee to speak on the item regarding the Cricklewood Library Children Centre Project and Archive move.

Mr Chambers addressed the committee as a member of the friends of Cricklewood Library and as a user of the archive. Mr Chambers explained what he felt were inaccuracies and omissions in the briefing paper, provided for this item, including the information provided on the consultation carried out and the legal position regarding the covenant. He also claimed that there was opposition to the children's centre expressed at a recent public meeting. In addition, he stated that he was of the impression that planning permission would be required if a children's centre was to be located in the library, because of the change of use of the building.

Mr Sayers also addressed the committee. He felt that the consultation had been misleading and had not been thorough. He did not believe that there was the support for the project as was suggested in the briefing note. He was of the belief that the library was better used than suggested in the briefing note. Also he was of the opinion that having another children's centre when there was one less than a mile away would be unnecessary and would cause disruption to the library.

In response to the legal issues regarding the covenant raised by Mr Chambers, Sue McKenzie (Head of Libraries, Arts and Heritage) stated that she was unable to go into the legal position as the Council were currently awaiting legal advice. Furthermore, in response to the issue of consultation she assured the committee that information was never withheld from people and that the consultation was comprehensive. She also stressed that consultation with service users on the design of the new building and service would continue. With regards to the issue of planning permission, Sue McKenzie stated that there was a possibility that planning permission would be needed. The chair thanked Mr Chambers and Mr Sayers for their contribution and informed them that their views had been noted by the committee.

6. **Cricklewood Library Children's Centre project and Archive move**

Sue McKenzie (Head of Libraries, Arts and Heritage) introduced her briefing note and provided the committee with the background, key points and latest position on the Cricklewood Library Children's Centre project and the related project to move Brent Archive to Willesden Green Library.

In the discussion which followed, a concern was raised that the crèche could cause disruption and noise problems to library users. In response, Sue McKenzie explained that to minimise disruption, the crèche would most likely be sited on the ground floor at the back of the building and that the possibility of sound proofing would be looked at. Members were keen to stress that there would be a need to ensure that a variety of books would be available. A concern was raised that many of the people who visit the new Kingsbury Library were not using it for traditional reasons and that this could happen to Cricklewood Library. In response, Sue McKenzie stated that the new Kingsbury Library had experienced sustained increased usage and book borrowing. A view was expressed that it was important to give careful consideration when deciding partnership arrangements for libraries. It was raised that there was confusion over what children centres actually do.

The committee were sympathetic to the proposals but felt that more work needed to be carried out on informing service users as to what children centres do, how they operate and how the centre and library would interact within the refurbished building. It was also felt that service users should be informed as to how the £400,000 investment in the building would be spent, how noise from children's centre would be contained to reduce the impact on library users and how access to the building would be separate for users of the library and children's centre to minimise disruption for library users. Members requested that the outcome of the legal investigations regarding the covenant on the building be reported to the members of the committee when completed.

RESOLVED:

that the briefing paper be noted.

7. **Leader's update on the Council's priorities**

Councillor Blackman (the Deputy Leader of the Council) was welcomed to the meeting. He explained that Councillor Lorber (Leader of the Council) was unable to attend the meeting and that he had sent his apologies. The committee had requested, following the Leader's update at the February 2009 meeting, that the following areas be addressed; the impact of the recession on local people and how the Council was responding to this, progress on the delivery of the improvement programme, progress on the provision of new social housing and efforts made to recruit more permanent social care staff.

Councillor Blackman began his update by explaining how the recession was having an impact locally. He informed the committee that whilst the income the council was receiving, for example through parking and land searches, had decreased, the demand on services had increased. He stated that the council had experienced an increase in the number of people applying for benefits and making enquiries. He added that Brent had the ninth highest claimant level in London. He stressed that the recession was not a white collar recession and that it was having an impact across the whole borough. He added that there was a marked difference in deprivation between areas, with Stonebridge having experienced the highest level of deprivation. He also highlighted that Brent was the fourth lowest borough for income levels and that the difference between the highest income and the lowest was considerable. Furthermore, he explained that whilst the unemployment rate in Brent was about the same as the London average, it was higher than the British average and that rises in unemployment could have a huge impact on the borough.

In order to reduce the impact of the recession on the borough, Councillor Blackman, informed the committee of the steps which were being taken. He explained that the council had to ensure that as the council makes service improvements and efficiencies that front line services could adapt and that robust data, which was being compiled, would be used to ensure that this happens. He stated that the Council would work to maximise revenue and take legal action against those who would not willingly pay their taxes. Yet, the council would also encourage benefit take up for those that needed it. Councillor Blackman also informed the committee that a small business rate relief was available to help small businesses. He explained that the number of businesses using this rate relief had increased, but that there were still many small businesses which were unaware that it existed. He stated that the council was working to increase small businesses' awareness of this rate relief. In order to ease unemployment, he explained that the council was working to make people aware of jobs available in the borough and how they could take advantage of training opportunities. The council, he added, was also working to increase the use of apprenticeships available for school leavers and was also working to support the development of the College of North West London.

Councillor Blackman also informed the committee that social housing development was being encouraged. Furthermore, the council had also recently reviewed its capital programme to look at what the council could do now to assist in the local economy. In the discussion which followed on the impact of the recession, the need for focusing on

those areas which had been worst hit by the recession was raised by the committee as being very important.

Councillor Blackman then went on to inform the committee on the progress of the improvement programme. He explained that the Director of Business Transformation had been appointed to support the council with its programme. He explained that there was a challenging time ahead for the next administration as it was likely that government grant would at best have a 0% increase and at worse could be reduced. In response to a concern expressed about the morale of staff within the council, he advised that reviews would be carried out in a way which would be open and transparent, with staff being kept informed of all progress. He explained that the council would be looking at ways to rationalise its property portfolio, the way it carries out commissioning and contract management, and the way it delivers IT. Councillor Blackman explained that the council would also be looking at how to stop duplication and maximise income and would continue to examine the possibility of shared services with other boroughs in West London.

Councillor Blackman then provided the committee with an update of the progress in the provision of new social housing. He explained that in the last financial year there were 477 social housing units built. Furthermore he stated that 275 units had changed from temporary accommodation to permanent social housing. He expressed a concern that private sector development had reduced due to the recession. However, he explained that there was more interest from housing associations. He stated that Brent was doing better than some other boroughs and that the council had funding for the next three years to deliver approximately 900 affordable homes. He also stated that through private finance initiatives, the aim was to deliver 275 new units, the first of which would provide accommodation for those with learning disabilities.

Councillor Blackman then informed the committee that Brent Housing Partnership had achieved funding for their settled home bid. In addition, he added that the council's housing department had worked with the Mayor of London to set a target of delivering 1600 new homes over the next three years. He stressed the need to also reach the council's Local Area Agreement target of 1374 affordable homes to ensure that the council receives the grant money.

The recession, Councillor Blackman explained, would lead to the number of section 106 agreements being reduced. However, he added that the government had announced further funding for housing projects, which would mean that there would be an opportunity for more resources, thus the opportunity for regeneration in areas such as South Kilburn. In the discussion which followed, a concern was raised that there were new blocks in Wembley which seemed to be empty. Phil Newby (Director of Policy and Regeneration) explained that this had happened as a result of the credit crunch.

In responding to the issue of recruiting more permanent social care staff, Councillor Blackman explained that the council was not experiencing any problems recruiting permanent social care staff in adult social care, except occupational therapists. He stated that there was a shortage of occupational therapists nationally. With regards to children services, he advised that the council was investing money to improve front line standards following the Baby P case and that a significant effort had been made to recruit permanent staff. He explained that front line services for children's social care

had the highest number of agency staff, but highlighted that there had been a 50% increase in the number of people permanently employed. He advised that the council's goal was to have two thirds of front line staff in children's social care permanently employed by the end of the year. Currently only 42% of staff working in child protection were permanent council employees. As well as recruiting permanent staff, he emphasised that the council was working to ensure that experienced staff be retained. In the discussion which followed, the concern was raised that an influx of new permanent staff could put pressure on existing experienced staff who would be needed to assist the less experienced staff. A concern was also raised as to the government's proposals to fast track recruits to social work. The committee noted that children's social work was a difficult sector to work in and recognised the difficulty in finding permanent staff who want to work in this area.

A discussion then followed on the issue of school places. Councillor Blackman highlighted that the number of school places required was hard to measure. One of the predictions, he stated, suggested that the borough could need 16 extra forms of entry by 2014. However, he added that figures tended to alter month to month, which had made it hard to assess the numbers of places required. Furthermore, recent arrivals from Eastern Europe were returning home which had made figures fluctuate. He advised the committee of what provisions had been made for the expansion of schools places and what was in discussion. It was raised that the Children and Family Overview and Scrutiny Committee had this issue on their work programme for this year.

The chair thanked Councillor Blackman for his contribution. It was noted that Councillor Lorber would be invited to the meeting in October and that members were asked to inform the chair or Andrew Davies of any questions that they would want to ask Councillor Lorber.

RESOLVED:

- (i) that the areas which were addressed be noted;
- (ii) that the briefing note sent to all members earlier in the year, providing details of the small business rate relief scheme be re-circulated;
- (iii) that Councillor Lorber to be invited to the Overview and Scrutiny meeting in October 2009 and that members should inform the chair or Andrew Davies of any questions that they would want to ask Councillor Lorber

8. Introduction to the work of the Business Transformation Department

Graham Ellis, the Council's Director of Business Transformation, provided the committee with an introduction to the work of the Business Transformation Department, in which he outlined his main priorities and key areas of work.

Graham Ellis joined Brent Council in February 2009. Since that time, he had been impressed with the council's ambition and by the commitment of staff to excellence. He began his presentation by explaining that his department incorporated HR, IT, One Stop Service / Customer Care, the People Centre and the Civic Centre Project and that the department's role was to support the council in its business transformation.

Graham Ellis introduced his four main areas of focus which were focusing on the customer, getting the basics right, improvement and efficiency and effective delivery. He explained that it was vital that the council puts the customer at the centre of everything that it does and that customer insight was key to ensuring effective service provision. He highlighted that the civic centre would become a benchmark for service offer in 2013.

The committee then heard about the importance of getting the basics right and was provided with examples such as the roll out of exchange and IP telephony and the roll out of new ways of working. Graham Ellis explained that HR and IT would need to play a key role in ensuring that the council was equipped with the right tools to achieve its ambitions. He stressed the need for services to work with HR and IT to let them know what support their services would require.

Graham Ellis explained that to ensure improvement and efficiency, the delivery of the one council programme was vital in building credibility, confidence and momentum. He believed that the £53 million savings which would be needed to be made over the next four years would be challenging but achievable. To ensure delivery of the improvement and efficiency programme, he stressed the importance of governance, effective programme and delivery management, strong leadership, good internal communications and a willingness to carry through promises.

In the discussion which followed, a concern was raised that staff morale, following the introduction of the improvement programme, was currently low in areas of the council and that those members of staff who would not be in the civic centre would be at further risk of low morale. In response, Graham Ellis stated that the majority of staff with whom he had spoken to had been positive in their response to the improvement and efficiency programme. He explained that what staff did not like was uncertainty and therefore there was a need to continue to ensure that staff were kept fully informed about everything so that they would continue to feel part of the process. He explained that a number of internal communications staff had been appointed to help improve internal communication. Furthermore, he was keen to stress that not only would the civic centre be an important key component in the regeneration of Wembley, but that it must also symbolise the way services would be delivered across the borough. If staff across the borough were to be given the right tools, he believed that the burden on them would decrease and staff morale would increase as a result.

A concern was also raised that often departments did not share data and that information was often duplicated and needed to be centralised. Graham Ellis agreed that information would need to be more centralised to avoid duplication. He ensured the committee that safeguarding measures would remain in place.

The committee thanked Graham Ellis for his presentation and invited him back to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in February to provide an update on the progress of the business transformation projects.

RESOLVED:

- (i) that the introduction to the work of the Business Transformation Department be noted;
- (ii) that Graham Ellis be invited to the Overview and Scrutiny meeting in February 2010 to provide an update on the progress of the business transformation projects.

9. One Stop Service Redesign Project Update

This report updated the committee on the following matters as requested at the Overview and Scrutiny meeting of 24th March 2009:

- (i) user contacts received via the self service facilities as part of the One Stop Service Redesign including the nature of enquiries received and any increases and decreases in particular service uses including enquiries related to school places;
- (ii) the contingency arrangements which were in place to manage any anticipated increase in user demand, associated with the economic recession, including a returning demand for face to face.

The chair noted that the report contained a good level of detail which covered the requested information. It was requested that an update on service demand figures be presented to the committee in February 2010 to ensure the continued monitoring of the possible impact of the recession on service demand. This was of particular interest following the reporting of a fall off of enquiries which the chair pointed out was surprising considering the recession.

RESOLVED:

- (i) that the report entitled 'One Stop Service Redesign Project Update' be noted;
- (ii) that an update on service demand figures be presented to the committee in February 2010.

10. Overview and Scrutiny Annual Report 2008/09

The chair introduced the Overview and Scrutiny Annual Report for 2008/09, which reflected the work of all of the committees within Brent's overview and scrutiny structure. It was noted by the committee that good progress had been made in all aspects of scrutiny. Members thanked officers for the support they had received as members of task groups.

RESOLVED:

that the Overview and Scrutiny Annual Report for 2008/2009 be agreed.

11. Care plans for people with learning disabilities and physical disabilities

Following a request by the chair, the committee had before them a briefing note setting out the council's responsibilities for care plans for people with learning disabilities and physical disabilities. The committee was asked to note the briefing paper and to discuss whether it wished to take forward any of the issues raised. There were no issues raised by the committee.

RESOLVED:

that the briefing paper entitled 'care plans for people with learning disabilities and physical disabilities' (appendix 1 of the report) be noted.

12. Overview and Scrutiny Committee Work Programme

Andrew Davies (Policy and Performance Officer) updated members on the committee's Work Programme for 2009/10 and stated that he would update the programme to include the issues raised at this meeting. It was noted that the October programme was looking very full and therefore that it may need to be altered to ensure that it would be more manageable.

RESOLVED:

that the work programme be noted.

13. Date of Next Meeting

It was noted that the next meeting was scheduled to take place on Tuesday 13 October 2009.

14. Any Other Urgent Business

None.

The meeting ended at 9.46 pm.

L JONES
Chair