



MINUTES OF THE ONE COUNCIL OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE **Wednesday, 6 July 2011 at 7.30 pm**

PRESENT: Councillor Ashraf (Chair) and Councillors Beckman, Chohan and Lorber and B M Patel (alternate for Councillor Colwill).

Also Present: Councillors Moloney and S Choudhary.

Apologies were received from: Councillors Colwill, McLennan, Mitchell Murray and Sheth

1. Declarations of personal and prejudicial interests

None declared.

2. Minutes of the last meeting held on 22 March 2011

RESOLVED:-

that the minutes of the previous meeting held on 22 March 2011 be approved as an accurate record of the meeting.

3. Matters arising

One Council programme update

In reply to a query from the Chair, Phil Newby (Director of Strategy, Partnerships and Improvement) confirmed that the resources were in place for the transition into adult life and special educational project to progress and it was at stage one of implementation. The project was due to report back to the Programme Board at the end of July.

4. Housing needs transformation project

Perry Singh (Assistant Director – Needs and Private Sector, Housing and Community Care) introduced the report and stated that the project focused on the work of both the Housing Resource Centre and Housing Solutions. The project built on successful improvement work already undertaken by the Housing Needs service to reduce homelessness applications and use of temporary accommodation. It also interlinked with the customer service and move to the Civic Centre projects. The project was also driven by the need to address budget pressures and a 30% reduction in resources was forecast between 2010/11 and 2012/13, including reduced capital funding for new build affordable housing. The project was required to deliver £0.75m in-year savings primarily through staff reductions and there would be a need to consolidate resources and use them as efficiently as possible. The situation was compounded by changes to Housing

Benefit and this would affect around 8,500 households in Brent and place pressure on preventing homelessness.

Perry Singh then outlined the three central work streams of the project, which were service transformation, accommodation management and demand management. For service transformation, a key objective was to reduce duplication, whilst rationalisation was required in respect of accommodation management and managing expectations of customers and providing clearer advice in situations where they were not eligible in the case of demand management. Perry Singh advised that it was intended to fully implement the service transformation and accommodation management work streams by March 2012, whilst demand management would continue to operate over a longer period depending on the progress of legislation and would not commence until the autumn of 2011. Another central aim of the project was to provide a seamless customer journey from beginning to end, whilst the commissioning aspect of the project aimed to improve procurement. Perry Singh informed Members that seeing how other local authorities were addressing this issue was also being undertaken.

During Members' discussion, Councillor Lorber commented on the large number of customers in category D of the housing waiting list and he enquired what advice were they given at the outset and did handling the number of cases of this type burden the council with additional costs. It was queried whether the length of time on the housing waiting list was still a factor in determining progress on it. Councillor Lorber sought clarification as to whether the council would have the authority to effectively eliminate category D from the housing waiting list. In respect of categories A and B, Councillor Lorber asked about the proportion of customers that made bids through Locata. Details were sought with regard to the extent of changes in commissioning and was the customer journey objective working effectively. Councillor B M Patel enquired if there were other ways to get on the housing waiting list and bid for housing other than on-line and whether assistance was provided in completing the necessary forms.

The Chair expressed concern about rationalisation of frontline staff and enquired how a customer-focused approach could be maintained. He sought further details as to how the service transformation work stream would operate and what were the principles that the Project Board was working too. Further information was also requested regarding on who was being consulted. With regard to improving customer satisfaction, the Chair asked over what time period this would be monitored. A response was also sought in respect of the implications of the Localism Bill on housing.

With the approval of the Chair, Councillor S Choudhary addressed the committee. He stressed the importance of informing those customers whose chances of obtaining housing was virtually nil that they should be informed of this at the earliest opportunity.

In reply to issues raised, Perry Singh explained that frontline staff had not been reduced, however there would not be extra staff to deal with the increasing demand. In order to be more effective in addressing the greater demand, cutting out instances of duplication of work was being undertaken, although Perry Singh acknowledged that it was difficult to envisage exactly how things would work as there were so many unknown variables, however the changes were absolutely

necessary. Members heard that consultants Ad Esse were undertaking workshops with frontline staff to assist with the service transformation work stream and a recent workshop had focused on what information to collect. It was anticipated that the Information Centre would provide considerable insight into where work should be concentrated on. Perry Singh advised that the Project Board's principles included bringing teams together and devising a clear strategy for procurement which was critical to the future of the service. A framework contract involving other West London boroughs would be commencing this week. In respect of consultation, this would involve an extensive list of stakeholders including housing associations and voluntary sector organisations and reviewing internal council processes. There would also be a wide consultation exercise with regard to future housing needs policy.

Perry Singh explained that category D waiting list customers were advised that it was unlikely that they would be successful in obtaining housing. However, he advised that there would be improvements to ensure customers in such situations were fully aware of this, including clear messages on the on-line service and also reducing the number of forms that needed to be completed. In addition, by answering a series of ten questions, it could be quickly ascertained if a customer would fall under category D. The on-line registration process would also be simplified, although processing category D claims did add to council costs. It was possible to suggest as part of policy that category D be eliminated in the future, as well as to no longer include people on the waiting list who lived outside of the borough. Members heard that the length of time on the waiting list was no longer used as a qualifying criteria and the current system split claims into four broad bands to prevent customers from exploiting the system to gain points to push them higher up the waiting list. Around 98% of housing bids were now undertaken on-line and although the proportion of categories A and B bidders was relatively small, this was being monitored and the council sometimes made bids on behalf of the most vulnerable customers. Concerning procurement and commissioning, action was being taken to reduce problems in respect of obtaining and retaining accommodation stock and improving dialogue with private landlords in respect of using their property for housing needs and arrangements for when contracts with landlords were coming close to the end. Perry Singh advised that work continued in developing the ideal customer journey and in particular was focusing on reducing the number of hand-offs between staff during the course of interaction with a customer. It was anticipated that bringing staff together under a single Brent Accommodation Team would enable a seamless customer journey and eliminate duplication.

Turning to customer satisfaction, Perry Singh advised that a recent sample survey had already indicated that this had improved, however further benchmarking exercises needed to be conducted and it was important that the questionnaires ascertained as to whether customers were happy with the service provided, as opposed to satisfaction with a particular outcome, such as securing a house. The committee heard that the Localism Bill was not anticipated to result in any significant changes in terms of housing allocation, however there was likely to be greater flexibility afforded to tenancy strategy including length of tenancies and this could be used as a lever to manage tenancy arrears. However, discharging tenants to the private sector would become more problematic because of the changes to Housing Benefit.

5. One Council programme update

Phil Newby introduced the report, stating that the committee would receive regular updates on the One Council programme during the year. He announced that £11.8m gross savings had been achieved by the programme during 2010/11, with a further £28m savings forecast for 2011/12 and it needed to achieve 60% of the savings required overall. Phil Newby then drew Members' attention to the various categories that the programme's projects fell under. Referring to the cross council projects, he informed the committee that this included focusing on areas such as how customers accessed services and reducing face to face contact and looking at other contact techniques such as the internet and an improved telephone system. Another area was ways of working, of which the key driver was the move to the Civic Centre project which would lead to fundamental changes in the way staff worked and make the best use of the technologies available to them. Support services were also being reviewed and it was noted that there was a big push within London to bring support services together for local authorities to share and the council was involved in a consortium with other local authorities in respect of Oracle. Strategic use of property was another priority, led by the strategic property project which aimed to make the most effective use of property and this was due to report back to the Programme Board in August. Consideration of how the council charges for services had been undertaken by the income maximisation project and the Commercial Opportunities Board would continue to identify opportunities for maximising income where appropriate.

Phil Newby then outlined some single directorate projects which involved reviewing process, commissioning on services and fundamentally changing a service and also some examples of multi directorate projects. There were also two partnership projects, including the transfer of public health from the Primary Care Trust to the council which would involve integration between Adult Social Care and Brent NHS and a more integrated approach to Health and Social Care which would focus on a preventative approach. Phil Newby drew Members' attention to the savings targets from 2010-2014 and the RAG status as set out in the report.

Phil Newby advised the committee that there would be moves to extend the programme in the following year to deliver increased savings and the dependencies between the projects needed to be closely managed. Consultants would be used where they could provide skills to staff that the council did not have so that projects could be supported wholly in-house in the future. In addition, the programme had been boosted by the appointment of 14 council officers to the Project Management Pool from across the council and they would be allocated projects on a secondment basis.

During discussion, Councillor Lorber enquired about the RAG status of the waste and street cleaning review and commented that residents had yet to receive direct information of the changes to the service that would commence on 1 October. He asked how the message would be conveyed to residents, commenting that there had been effective communication in respect of this when compulsory recycling had been introduced. He sought clarification as to why the initial target of savings had been increased from £50m over four years to £90m to £100m and further details with regard to savings achieved for 2010/11 and future forecast savings were required.

The Chair enquired what steps were being taken to address projects that were not achieving their savings targets and at what stage would the Programme Board intervene. It was queried whether reducing staff would impact upon delivering customer service related projects. Information was sought on how residents were being consulted with regard to changes to services and how would their responses be fed back. The Chair also asked if additional costs would be involved with regard to transferring some public health responsibilities from Brent NHS.

With the approval of the Chair, Councillor S Choudhary addressed the committee and he queried whether there was any risk that the costs involved in respect of the four facilitating and enabling initiatives outlined in the report would outweigh the benefits.

In reply to the issues raised, Phil Newby advised that where projects were underachieving, the Programme Board would identify the issues causing prevention of progress and the projects concerned would be required to report back to the Board on a more frequent basis. The Project Management Office demanded rigorous reporting of each project and would intervene immediately and alert the Programme Board where there were concerns about a specific project. In respect of projects at red RAG status, children's social care transformation was complicated by unpredictable patterns in demand. With regard to waste and street cleansing review, new proposals were to be put to the July Executive following negotiations with the contractor, Veolia. Overall, the long term saving prospects for this project were good, but there were specific problems this year that needed to be addressed. Phil Newby added that the model that the project was based on involved changing residents' behaviour, however the Programme Board needed to be satisfied that the initial investment would be rewarded with the necessary savings. He acknowledged concerns raised by Councillor Lorber in respect of publicising changes to waste and street cleansing and would take this up with Environment and Neighbourhood Services who were producing a marketing strategy. Phil Newby added that the committee may want to consider inviting officers from Environment and Neighbourhood Services to the next meeting to provide an update on progress with this project, which Members agreed to.

With regard to customer service, Phil Newby explained that services were being looked at as a whole and from a customer point of view. By taking a customer-focused approach and being more efficient, an improved customer service could be achieved. A commonsense and logical approach would be taken to consulting with residents and taking into account their feedback, however it would not be possible to please all residents especially in the context of the savings that needed to be made. There would be a closure report on completion of each project which would give the opportunity to look at where improvements could be made on future projects. In respect of transferring public health functions from NHS Brent to the council, Phil Newby advised that the budget should follow who was undertaking the function and that funding would be ring-fenced. Discussions were taking place with NHS Brent with regard to the definition of public health and future provision and it was expected that the council would assume public health responsibilities in 2013. Public Health England also had some responsibilities in this area.

Phil Newby advised that there had been a huge increase in the savings required since the One Council programme had initially been launched and more projects needed to be bought into the programme to deliver the savings necessary. There

had been some success in the West London partnerships in respect of procurement, but not in combining services with other local authorities to date. However, there were a number of discussions at both West London and specific borough level in combining to increase purchasing power and such measures were gaining momentum. Phil Newby confirmed that the benefits of the four facilitating and enabling initiatives would far outweigh any costs involved and the preventative approach being taken would save money over a longer term time frame.

6. Car repair and spray painting garages task group report

Councillor Moloney, chair of the task group, was invited to address the committee. Councillor Moloney began by explaining that the task group was set up to investigate car repair and spray painting garages following the agreement by Council of a motion put forward by Councillor Allie. Although the activities of such garages were not widespread in the borough, there were cases of significant problems caused at some specific locations. Councillor Moloney stated that the task group had investigated sites which were considered hotspots, including Alperton, Dollis Hill and Willesden Green with the relevant service area officers. Enforcement action had subsequently been taken at a premises in Willesden Green. Councillor Moloney drew Members' attention to the recommendations of the task group in the report as set out below:-

1. That the complaint and referral form and log developed by officers at the task group's request is implemented. Each department will nominate an officer responsible for maintaining and monitoring this.
2. That complaints made in relation to this type of premises should be monitored and reported back to members via the annual complaints report.

During discussion, Councillor Lorber enquired what measures were being undertaken to ensure that other relevant service areas were aware of the problems that can be caused by such garages and added that the problems can remain even after they have been reported.

The Chair welcomed the report and suggested that assurances should be made to residents that reporting the problem to any service area would lead to the problem being investigated by relevant officers. He added that residents should be encouraged to use all forms of contacting the council about such matters, including the internet, and a template form may well assist.

With the approval of the Chair, Councillor S Choudhary addressed the committee. Councillor S Choudhary welcomed the recommendations of the task group and stated that some garages along Hassop Road continued to cause significant problems.

In reply to the issues raised, Councillor Moloney advised that there was a long term plan to address issues in relation to Hassop Road, however it would require funding for the regeneration that was sought for the area. Members heard that the task group report had set out that problems could be reported to any service area of the council. It was also noted that there were many garages carrying out car repairs legally, however the measures recommended by the task group would be reviewed

after a period to identify their effectiveness to date and to see whether any other measures should be considered.

Jacqueline Casson (Senior Policy Officer, Strategy, Partnerships and Improvement) added that the customer service project was also addressing matters in relation to reporting problems and submitting complaints to the council. The relevant service areas had attended site visits along with task group members and a referral form was in the process of being developed.

RESOLVED:-

- (i) that the recommendations of the car repair and spray painting task group be agreed; and
- (ii) that the report be forwarded to the Executive for consideration.

7. One Council Overview and Scrutiny work programme

The Chair referred to the report that included suggested topics for consideration and also from suggestions that had been made at the Joint One Council, Children and Young People and Partnership and Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting on 2 June.

During discussion, Councillor Lorber commented that a report on renewing the agreement with Brent Housing Partnership (BHP) was shortly to be considered by the Executive. He felt that the contract between BHP and the council needed to be thoroughly scrutinised and he enquired how this would be undertaken.

In reply, Jacqueline Casson advised that a report on registered social landlords' performance, which would include that of BHP's, was to be put to the Partnership and Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Perry Singh acknowledged the importance of monitoring the contract in place between BHP and the council, although BHP had performed well to date. Members agreed to Phil Newby's suggestion that this matter be discussed further and consideration be given as to a suitable overview and scrutiny committee to look into this matter.

Jacqueline Casson further advised that quarterly performance and finance information and waste and recycling were due to be considered at the committee meeting on 14 September. Some ideas with regard to topics for future working task groups would also be put forward. The Chair asked that an update on the Localism Bill also be presented at the next meeting.

8. Date of next meeting

It was noted that the next meeting of the One Council Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting was scheduled for Wednesday, 14 September 2011 at 7.30 pm.

9. Any other urgent business

None.

The meeting closed at 9.20 pm

J ASHRAF
Chair