



**Overview and Scrutiny  
Annual Report  
2017/18**

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## Introduction



The challenge for scrutiny is to focus on what really matters. That can be difficult in a borough like Brent with so many challenges. As this annual report shows, at times what we discuss can be uncomfortable such as when we heard that Brent is among the worst in England for childhood obesity and children's oral health. But there have also been many good developments such as the continued improvement of schools or progress in children's social care.

Some policy issues need to be looked at in greater depth than a committee report can allow so last year we set up a task and finish group to look at home care commissioning, which is a vital service. It's also important to keep on top of certain issues such as safeguarding; it was informative to receive the annual reports of the borough's safeguarding boards as we will do again in the future.

### **Cllr Ketan Sheth, Chair of Community and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee**



I was pleased to chair the Housing Scrutiny Committee for 2017/18 given the importance of this area of work, for those who live, work and travel to the borough. It was the Committee's first year and it successfully scrutinised a range of important areas. It was the year where the transfer of Brent Housing Partnership took place and this influenced the work programme. As this report shows, our work focused on areas ranging from the rent reduction on the Lynton Close Travellers site to homelessness where the Committee had presentations on the single person trial for the Homelessness Reduction Act and the Find Your Home

Programme. Three Registered Providers also presented to the Committee and gave an insight into their approach.

For the past year Housing has been influenced by the tragedy at Grenfell Tower and the impact will dominate for some time. With national inquiries taking place the Housing Scrutiny Committee did not want to duplicate investigations by national bodies. We set up a Task and Finish group to look at in great depth fire safety in low rise buildings. I am keen to see this year, how the recommendations have been implemented. We have been proactive in getting out and taking to residents and communities and we undertook a site visit to the Travellers site in Lynton Close during the year.

A council tenant and leaseholder were co-opted onto the Committee. They have made a positive contribution to the Committee and their experience will be used even more next year.

I would like to thank everyone who has contributed and taken part.

### **Cllr Janice Long, Chair Housing Scrutiny Committee**



2017/18 was another very productive year for the Resources and Public Realm Scrutiny Committee as we sought to add value by looking at some of the key strategic issues affecting the council and the people of Brent.

We certainly did not shirk the big issues and used our task group time to examine complex issues like the prevalence of food banks in the borough and the impact of the London business rates pilot pool on council finances. It is in looking at major strategic problems such as this that scrutiny really comes into its own.

Towards the end of the year we undertook reality checking visits to enhance our understanding of the issues ahead of the formal committee meetings. These included a visit to Brent's civic amenities site and a focus group with trading standards officers. These really helped and we will certainly continue with this approach in the coming year.

**Cllr Matt Kelcher, Chair of Resources and Public Realm Scrutiny Committee**

# Part One: Community and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee

## 1. Work programme 2017/18

The 2017/18 work programme spanned a range of policy areas under its remit including adult social care, children's services, education, health, and public health. The work programme was largely agreed at the start of the municipal year to allow members to map out and plan their activities but with enough capacity for new issues. The work programme included holding Cabinet members to account at committee as well as policy development by task groups which developed their recommendations.

### 1.1. Health

Scrutiny of health services was a highly important area of work for the committee. In particular, the committee took a close look at **extended access to GP services** at a special meeting, at which Brent Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) presented a report. The CCG was proposing to change the GP extended access service in 2018, and the proposals were presented by the Chief Operating Officer and other officers. Members of the committee made four recommendations after scrutinising the proposals, including three recommendations highlighting the transition arrangements for unregistered patients, disability access, and communications. In addition, one recommendation was made to NHS England by members around the issue of patients and online booking for the extended access service to GPs. The committee also looked at the wider area of **Primary Care Transformation** by Brent CCG earlier in the year.

Another health issue has been **female genital mutilation (FGM)**. Officers from Brent Clinical Commissioning Group presented a report which outlined the CCG's work on identifying cases of FGM in the borough. Work around FGM had been ongoing for a long period of time and in addition to mandatory reporting, Brent CCG said it had been trying to eradicate the practice by working with partners across the health economy, the police, and the voluntary sector. In relation to support for women who had undergone FGM, it was noted that a range of practitioners provided services to victims and a number of local hospitals had specialised clinics which had good reputation. When a referral was made, all concerns were taken into account and mental and physical assessments were carried out so clinicians could determine the individual's health needs.

In terms of the wider health economy there was a discussion about the **Sustainability and Transformation Plan** in 2017 and a presentation by the Cabinet Member for Community and Wellbeing. Members were told about the actions which had been undertaken. Six areas had been identified to be included in the Brent Health and Care Plan, which is a local version of the Sustainability and Transformation Plan. They include: new care models, joining up older people's services, better outcomes for people with mental health issues, transforming care and developing Central Middlesex Hospital.

Committee also heard from one of the NHS trusts. North West London Healthcare NHS Trust gave a report on scores for **Patient Led Assessments of the Care Environment (PLACE)** at local hospitals including Central Middlesex and Northwick Park Hospital. The scores, which are part of a national system, concentrated on the

care environment and did not look at staff behaviours or clinical care provision. Scoring is based entirely on the observations made at the actual time of the assessment. The full PLACE scores for the hospitals in the trust were published with the committee papers.

## 1.2. Public Health

The work of public health, which sits within the local authority, is often entwined with health. An example of this is **children's oral health**. A discussion took place at committee to which public health and officers from Public Health England and NHS England contributed. Members were told that Brent children had some of the worst oral health outcomes in England with dental extractions remaining the top cause of elective hospital admissions in children. There had been some improvement, but levels of tooth decay, which is almost entirely preventable, remained very high. Members heard that National Health Service England (NHSE) had awarded a new five-year Community Dental services contract to Whittington Health from 1 April 2017, with funding for oral health promotion staff remaining with NHSE. Brent was the first borough that fully recognised that oral health promotion resource sat within the contract. Failures of prevention had contributed to high levels of decay but it was felt that the contract would enable the delivery of an integrated service by several health partners.

At a separate meeting, the committee was given a verbal update about the prevalence of **tuberculosis** in the borough. Members heard that despite the fact that Brent's rates of TB infection per 100, 000 people were declining, they remained above the average for England and the rates used by the World Health Organisation (WHO) to identify areas of high prevalence. In terms of absolute numbers, there were approximately 200 cases registered a year in Brent. A clinical Director at Brent Clinical Commissioning Group explained that a special screening service had been run since May 2016 in collaboration with Brent CCG and Harrow CCG. It was part of a national programme and it focused on patients aged 16 to 35 who had arrived in the UK and had lived in a high-risk country.

Another important issue faced by health and public health is **childhood obesity**. In 2018 the committee discussed a report presented by the Cabinet Member for Community Wellbeing and the Director of Public Health. Members heard that there has been a worsening of childhood obesity in Brent since 2014/15, which is above London and England averages. The most worrying trend is the proportion of obese children in year 6 which has risen since 2013 and is higher than the London and England averages. The recent data shows that one in three of Brent's children are obese by the time they leave primary school. On the basis of the discussion and the evidence presented, the committee suggested that childhood obesity is considered as a task group during 2018/19 to enable members to look at the problem in far greater depth.

Brent Council also takes part in the **North West London Joint Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee (JHOSC)** which looks at the impact of Shaping a Healthier Future and other cross-borough aspects of health policy. Cllr Ketan Sheth is Brent's representative on the JHOSC, which is made up of seven London boroughs, again for 2018/19.

### 1.3. Adult Social Care

One important area of adult social care is services for people with learning disabilities. The committee looked at the **life chances of adults with learning disabilities** in the borough. The report addressed how the local authority and its partners in health services are helping to improve outcomes across social care, health, education and employment for adults with learning disabilities. Members were told that the borough had performed well in relation to annual health checks with 90% of residents with a learning disability registered with a GP surgery and receiving a health check. This exceeded the national target of 64%. However, an area which required improvement was the number of people with learning disabilities in employment. Although employment rates in Brent had improved over the last year, these remained lower than the London average. Overall, the number of people with learning disabilities was increasing and their needs were becoming more complex. In terms of housing, the New Accommodation for Independent Living (NAIL) project had been successful so far, with a wide range of units provided. They had a capacity ranging from 6 to over 90 units.

### 1.4. Safeguarding

Members again scrutinised the annual reports of the borough's two statutory safeguarding boards to review progress in this area of multiagency partnership work. The annual report of the **Brent Local Safeguarding Children Board** was presented by the Independent Chair who highlighted the quantity and the quality of safeguarding. On quantity, he said that performance data received from various partners was contributing to safeguarding in Brent. In terms of quality, the way the Board had carried out its audit of partners' safeguarding self-assessments (the "Section 11 Audit") had changed – employees of organisations which sat on the Board were required to complete a questionnaire which measured their level of knowledge of safeguarding and allowed their managers to identify areas of concern where action had to be taken. Members questioned the results of the Section 11 Audit. A member of the committee also enquired about the level of confidence that children at risk were protected. The Independent Chair said that he was confident about safeguarding based on the work carried out by the Brent Family Front Door (BFFD) which processed all referrals and had good relationships with key partners such as the police, housing and health providers.

Committee also heard the report of the **Brent Safeguarding Adults' Board**. The report was presented by the Independent Chair who said that in 2016-2017 the council's Safeguarding Adults Team (SAT) had received 1,712 concerns compared to 1,678 referrals made in 2015-2016. In addition, 628 concerns had been investigated and completed as Section 42 enquiries. The committee heard that there had been a protocol to work effectively with adults who self-neglected. In addition, the Board would turn its attention to standards in care homes because more safeguarding adult reviews had been commissioned at national level although no specific problems had been identified in Brent. Measures had been taken to increase the engagement of user groups and they had been allowed to address the Board. However, progress had been slower than expected and there had not been representation from a service user group. The chair emphasised that resourcing of the board had to be examined in detail and engagement of various partners had to be monitored in future.

## 1.5. Children's Services

The Community and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee looked at a range of children's services over 2017/18, including services in children's social care. One of the reports the members scrutinised was the Written Statement of Action and progress following the local area inspection by Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission of **special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)** in Brent. A report was presented to committee members about the strengths and weaknesses identified and the action which is being taken. The report on the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Statement of Action was jointly presented by the Strategic Director for Children and Young People at Brent Council and the Chief Operating Officer of Brent CCG.

There was also a report on the **Care Leavers Local Offer** and the implications of upcoming legislative changes. The purpose of the report was to provide information to the Scrutiny Committee about the effectiveness of current services for care leavers and the implications of recent legislative changes introduced by the Children and Social Work Act. One of the key changes from the Act will be that the duty and responsibility to all care leavers was extended to the age of 25, regardless of their education and employment status.

The committee scrutinised the **Annual School Standards and Achievement report 2016-2017**, showing there has been significant improvement in the proportion of good and outstanding provision. Finally, the committee returned to look at the implementation of **Signs of Safety** in children's social care. This was first looked at by a members' overview and scrutiny task group in 2016, and there had been a recommendation in the report to review implementation after a year.

## 2. Task and Finish Groups

Time-limited task groups made up of a small group of councillors – and sometimes co-opted members – were set up during 2016/17 to look at a number of areas in detail by the committee. Each of the task groups developed recommendations from their work.

### 2.1. Home Care Commissioning

A task group on **home care commissioning**, which was chaired by Councillor Ketan Sheth, was set up by the committee and reported to Cabinet on 9 April 2018. The task group had a focus on four areas: resources, health and wellbeing outcomes, partnerships and relationships, and the quality of home care. Members of the task group engaged with a number of stakeholders as part of their review. The task group developed three recommendations:

- A) The London Living Wage is introduced incrementally as part of new commissioning model so that home care workers working for providers commissioned by Brent Council are paid the London Living Wage rate by 2021.



B) A minimum standard of training is incorporated in the new commissioning model which gives staff in Brent sufficient development opportunities to encourage home care as a career within the social care sector.

C) A home care partnership forum should be set up as part of a new commissioning model to discuss issues of strategic importance to stakeholders involved in domiciliary care services in Brent.

The task group was given background information about the Home Care and Reablement Review as well as data and insight gathered by officers who had met with different stakeholders. This information was based on meetings and surveys with the home care agencies, the workforce and people who use home care and their families. The task group also looked at the Adult Social Care Local Account, and Brent Council's Complaints Report 2016/17. It also organised its own questionnaire for providers, distributed at a meeting to which all providers had been invited. The focus of the task group's work was on understanding and reviewing the policy issues, what the data and insight was saying about the problems from the perspectives of different stakeholders and developing recommendations on the basis of the evidence which they gathered.

The committee will request an update on home care commissioning in 2018/19.

### 3. Engagement

As part of the 2017/18 Work Programme members committed to engagement with residents in the borough as part of the committee's work. In October as part of European Local Democracy Week, Cllr Sheth ran a **scrutiny café** to allow members of the public to suggest areas which the committee should be looking at. Members of the public put forward ideas, particularly around health issues, which could be looked at.

Cllr Sheth also attended a meeting of **Brent Youth Parliament (BYP)** in November and gave a presentation about the work of the committee focusing on young people's issues, and how BYP members can be involved. He highlighted forthcoming items at committee which will affect young people's lives – these included services for care leavers and school standards. A former member of BYP had been involved in last year's members' task group on child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) and Cllr Sheth said that he was keen that young people should be involved in the work of the committee. It should be noted that BYP has observer status on the committee and members of the executive regularly attend and contribute to the reports and discussion at committee. BYP contributions have been particularly welcome and effective and the committee will look forward to working with them again 2018/19 as well.

Members of the committee have continued to develop their work by working with the **Centre for Public Scrutiny**. Councillor Sheth attended a special conference organised by the Centre for Public Scrutiny (CfPS) on 27 June 2017, which was on the theme of health scrutiny and accountability. He was also at a special event organised for councillors and health service professionals to discuss overview and scrutiny. Cllr Sheth also presented to a meeting of elected members at the **Institute of Local Government (INLOGOV)** at the University of Birmingham on 30 June about

the work of the committee and its approach to overview and scrutiny in the local authority. The committee is keen to work with the CfPS and the institute again in the next year.

Overall, in 2018/19 the committee will be committed to doing more to increase engagement in overview and scrutiny by the local community, and ensuring that more voices can be heard when important issues affecting residents and the community are discussed.

As members of the public are increasingly using **social media**, the committee is continuing to promote its work using social media such as Twitter. By using the local authority's Twitter handle @Brent\_Council the forthcoming meetings and agendas for each committee have been promoted and it allows residents to find out what will be discussed. Again, the committee will be doing more with social media in the next year and sees it as another platform through which it can increase its engagement with the local community and enable more people to contribute to and find out about overview and scrutiny.

## Part Two: Housing Scrutiny Committee

### 4. Work programme 2017/8

Like the other scrutiny committees, the Housing Scrutiny Committee held a dedicated session at the beginning of the municipal year to plan its work for 2017/18. The area of Fire Safety featured heavily at the Scrutiny Committee, and members were also keen to hear from representatives of registered providers in the borough. Other themes included transition and transformation of housing services, the appointment of co-opted members, performance, engagement, and complaints handling.

There were 6 Scrutiny Committee meetings during the year spanning July 2017 to March 2018. There was also a Task Group focused on Fire Safety.

In July 2017, the Committee focused on **Fire Safety** measures. Officers provided an update on planned activity and the measures that were being taken in relation to assessing potential risks, providing assurances and responding to wider public interest. The report was noted by Members. The scope of the Task Group was discussed and it was noted that work with the Housing Service during the development of the work programme was important and that new expenditure plans on Fire Safety would be provided to the Group.

The Committee also received an update on the **transition to the Council of the housing management function and the Housing Operations Transformation programme**. Transition covered governance arrangements, contracts and staffing. It was noted that a broader transformation would run parallel with the transition focusing on full optimisation of processes and technologies, resident engagement and tailoring the new service to their needs. A restructure was likely to start in January 2018 with full implementation of all changes by June 2018. Discussion centred on issues related to contracts, staffing, resident engagement, budget, performance and service management. Points were raised about the multiple contracts across the borough and the need to ensure that effective engagement with residents takes place. Land ownership and “un-adopted land” was discussed and in particular the challenges that this poses in terms of contracts. The Committee paid particular attention to the new staffing arrangements as part of the Brent Housing Partnership (BHP) transformation.

In September, the Committee heard updates on the costs of the March 2017 fire safety assessments and the availability of funds from the original £10m received from the installation of mobile phone masts. It was also given an update on the outcomes from a meeting of a forum of Housing Associations and Registered Providers to discuss various fire risk issues.

A report was presented on **BHP performance, resident engagement and stock**. Areas noted include improved performance on rent collection, as well as improvements in four critical areas – call handling in the contact centre, repairs, rents and health and safety. It was noted that a resident engagement strategy would be developed and further engagement options explored. In addition an equality impact assessment would be undertaken for vulnerable residents living at BHP properties. Discussion also took place about the variance in grounds maintenance in different estates. The Committee heard that estate inspector resources had been redirected to fire safety but that there was scope for re-instating inspection and the timescales were

yet to be determined. The Committee heard that asbestos compliance practices were also being reviewed. Members were briefed that the overall voids system was due to be agreed and reviewed by December 2017.

The Committee received a report on the **implementation of actions previously recommended by the Local Government Ombudsman** in relation to a complaint relating to domestic violence, as well as the further recommendations by the Community Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee on this issue made in November 2016. Activities taken forward by BHP and housing needs officers included training (delivered by Shelter) on tackling domestic violence, a mystery shopping exercise across six participating boroughs which would test how officers were dealing with cases of domestic abuse and would set a benchmark against which to measure improvements. Finally, officers stated that an Outcome Based Review had been launched, which highlighted some areas for improvement specific to housing that would be taken forward.

A report was presented by officers on the **rent and management of the Travellers Site** at Lynton Close. The report set out progress that had been made against four key areas - financial inclusion, overcrowding, fire safety and anti-social behaviour and the next steps to be taken. In the discussion which followed Members had an opportunity to scrutinise some of the site's financial issues. It was agreed that a report would be prepared by officers for Cabinet in relation to rent charges. Other areas discussed included the management of the site, overcrowding, size of the site, fire safety, health and safety and progress in these areas.

In November, the Committee received a report on **Leaseholder Services**. Members were given an overview of the engagement processes in place for both tenants and leaseholders as well as payment plan options for leaseholders. The discussion that followed centred on resident engagement, commissioning works and payment options.

**Housing complaints** were discussed and improvements noted with officers stating that the overall number of complaints had been gradually decreasing. Discussion took place about the handling of Members' complaints and the increase in private housing service complaints with officers noting that contract management was an area that needed further improvement. The Committee also discussed the issue of payment of major works bills and ways of raising better awareness about the different options available to residents. Officers explained that various payment options were available, with the notices used to give a clear indication of the works planned and an estimation of the costs. Members heard that the Council had a legal responsibility to charge actual costs of works and where challenges to estimates arose these would be put through the Council's property services team for further investigation.

**In January 2018**, the Committee received a report on the **Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and Rent Setting**. The report set out the proposals for 2018/19 rent and service charges, provided an overview of the Council's capital investment spend for housing as well as outlining the proposed mitigation strategy prior to full roll out of Universal Credit (UC) scheduled for November 2018. Members were reassured that Housing Management services has a strategy in place, to review and manage potential increase in arrears. The service was also putting in place a range of mitigation activities to ensure agility of rent collection system and to support residents.

Members heard that there was a commitment from the Council to review the mobile home pitches' rent at the Lynton Close travellers' site as well as modernise the site. Further discussion focused on the Capital Programme and the amount allocated for aids and adaptations.

The Committee was joined by representatives from **Metropolitan Housing**, one of the borough's Registered Providers. The level and quality of services delivered to local residents was outlined, and Members sought further details on a range of issues including repairs services, housing performance, communication with residents and councillors, ground maintenance issues and the Universal Credit roll out preparation. Further clarification was sought about future plans for surveying the condition of its housing stock. It was agreed that further information on "Right to Buy" would be circulated to Members. Finally, in the context of resident engagement, Members heard that Metropolitan Housing was taking an active role in reviewing performance, contractors and shaping activities and improvements based on residents' needs.

The Committee received a **progress update on a previous task group report on Brent's Housing Associations**. Members discussed a number of areas including, future service charges in respect of "right to buy", service charge payment options, housing association forums and fixed-term tenancies. The report provided a detailed update against a range of recommendations, demonstrating continuing commitment to a more productive and proactive approach and transforming the relationship with Housing Associations in order to achieve the aims as set out in the Housing Strategy - such as increasing supply of affordable housing, improving the standard of social housing and developing resident engagement. Members heard that most actions from the report had been completed or were no longer required.

The Committee heard a verbal update on a new **scaffolding protocol** applicable Borough-wide. Officers stressed the importance of the need to provide a value for money service to residents and that no scaffolding is erected unless the consultation process had been completed. It was noted that a fixed sum was payable by the council and so no additional payments would be made for scaffolding kept longer than instructed by the Council. Officers assured Members that scaffolding would not be erected without first communicating with residents. Members also learned that plans were in place to resolve the ongoing parking issues, with the intention being to use Traffic Management Orders to help improve the situation in general.

In February the Committee welcomed representatives from **Genesis Housing**, another Registered Provider in the borough with more than 6000 properties. Discussions included the forthcoming merger with Notting Hill Housing, with plans in place to appoint a local contact officer and to improve engagement with residents, for example, undertaking site inspection visits that residents were invited to join.

A discussion followed about the conversion of social tenancies to affordable rents. The Committee was advised that the overall turnaround of converted tenancies was relatively low, and were based on a combination of factors including the housing association's ability to build, grants attached to the property, grants available from central government and the revenue required to be raised. Members were also given an update on Genesis' leasing scheme, and discussed performance, property maintenance, community funds and fire safety arrangements.

Members also received a report focused on the **Find Your Home Programme**, initiated following the introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act in April 2017, which had helped over 3000 people. Members welcomed the scheme but also noted that private rented sector accommodation was not a long-term solution but a short-term intervention.

Officers gave an update on the Council's **Housing Development Plans** and infill programme. They explained that housing demand in Brent was in line with the overall London trend and that the plans, which were part of the Council's Housing Strategy, were aimed at responding to the service needs. Members emphasised the importance to consult with residents on any incentives available from contractors as well as looking at overall price and quality of the service provided.

In March Members welcomed **Catalyst Housing**, focusing on customer satisfaction, investment and improvement works. Engagement with both residents and councillors was discussed and in particular how this could be improved. There was also discussion on fire safety, in particular smoke alarms, and information sharing with residents about maintenance. Catalyst confirmed that there was a fire evacuation strategy in place for each building.

Members received a report on the **Homelessness Prevention Programme**, providing information about the key changes and implications of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 which was due to take effect from 3rd April 2018 as well as an overview of the role and performance of the Council's Single Homeless Prevention Scheme (SHPS), including lessons learned to date. Members learned that there would be a new statutory duty for public bodies to make referrals to the Council of families under threat of becoming homeless in order to prevent this at an early stage. Members enquired about the financial implications of the Act, with officers explaining that Brent was well placed in preparation for the new Act but financial predictions were difficult as spending and demand had not yet started.

A discussion then took place on the **Landlord Licensing Scheme** introduced in January 2015. Officers set out the impact of the scheme on private rented sector tenants since its introduction. Discussions also took place about licensing fees, the impact on landlords and tenants and tackling fly-tipping.

Members lastly received a report on **Customer Service Performance** and the significant improvements in relation to the performance of the Housing Contact Centre that had been made since October 2017. At the time of the meeting, an action plan was being developed to progress improvements in areas such as call handling. Amongst the key points in the plan was the need to review the waiting times and align it more closely with the service standard.

## **5. Task and Finish Groups**

One time-limited task group was set up during 2018/19 to look at **the fire safety of low-rise domestic properties in Brent**. The Task Group reviewed types of fire incidences, cause of death, fire safety measures and fire safety awareness campaigns in Brent with a specific focus on low-rise properties (up to nine storeys). It reported to Cabinet in January 2018 with a number of recommendations that covered the following areas:

- Fire safety measures for Brent Council owned properties, social housing delivered by Registered Providers (RP); details of respective communications strategy;
- Building regulations applicable for owner-occupied and PRS properties;
- Emergency vehicle access for social housing estates with a focus on parking enforcement;
- Brent Council and RP housing allocations policy based on residents ability to respond to fire and other emergency incidences;
- Available facilities (e.g. bicycle shed) for residents to store large items (e.g. bicycles and buggy's) and clear items (e.g. white goods, furniture) in common areas.

## **6. Visits and engagement**

The Housing Scrutiny Committee believes that visiting sites and speaking with service users where possible, provides a real first hand insight when scrutinising these services. The Housing Scrutiny Committee made a visit to the Travellers Site at Lynton Close, in advance of considering a report on this topic at its meeting in September.

As part of European Local Democracy Week Cllr Long held a scrutiny café in Willesden Library. Issues raised include the lack of publicity in libraries, repairs, the complaints process at Network Housing and the slow progress on an infill development.

## **7. Wider Scrutiny Networks**

Members of the Committee have been involved with scrutiny networks and organisations outside Brent. One of the most important of these has been the London Scrutiny Network, which is made up of representatives of Scrutiny Committees from a number of London boroughs. The Chair of the Committee attended a number of these meetings during 2017/18. The Committee has also built links with the Centre for Public Scrutiny and the Chair attended its national conference in December 2017.

## Part Three: Resources and Public Realm Scrutiny Committee

### 8. Work programme 2016/17

The process of agreeing the annual work programme for the Resources and Public Realm Committee included a workshop organised for Scrutiny Members, Lead Members and Strategic Directors, where all were invited to pitch ideas for scrutiny for the forthcoming year. These ideas were then judged against criteria developed to reflect the principles of effective scrutiny.

A relevant, focused and strategic annual work programme was agreed at the committee's first meeting and was kept under constant review. The 2017/18 work programme covered a wide range of policy areas within the committee's remit, spanning corporate resources, regeneration and environment, transport, community safety and the performance, policy and partnerships department. It also extended beyond the council to include submissions from the Department from Work and Pensions and the Metropolitan Police.

#### 8.1. Regeneration and Environment

The Lead Members for Regeneration, Growth, Employment and Skills, and for Environment, presented a **follow up review on Brent high street initiatives**, which provided a performance analysis of the newly recruited town centre managers, the digital high streets project and the in-house uniformed litter patrol service. There were questions from Members on Business Improvement Districts (BIDs), the roles of the Town Centre Managers, performance indicators and the potential for expansion of the roles to other areas. Regarding the uniformed litter patrol service, matters discussed included what actions could be taken to improve the timeliness of payments for fixed penalty notices and the responsibility for educating residents on appropriate waste disposal.

The committee considered the revised **Tree Management Policy** for the borough, and members questioned whether the council targeted the planting of new trees to areas most affected by poor air quality. Queries were raised regarding sources of funding, and whether the council had explored approaches successfully utilised by other boroughs. There were also a questions on tree maintenance in Brent and discussion of the lack of resources available for planting of trees on any significant scale.

The committee made a comprehensive series of recommendations for amendments to the policy, including the inclusion of a section on air quality and in particular the importance of street trees in mitigating the impact of air pollution.

Members reviewed of **recycling rates in Brent**, with the Lead Member for Environment highlighting the challenge to the council in sustainably maintaining recycling rates against an increasing proportion of flats in the borough. Members sought clarity on trends in Bulky Waste requests and the use of the Abbey Road Brent Reuse and Recycling Centre site since the Bulky Waste charge was introduced. Members also queried why the council was not being bolder in its recycling targets and asked what strategy was in place to address the issue of recycling in flats. There was also discussion on whether Brent was able to increase charges for Trade Waste and on how to better educate Brent's residents regarding the free of charge services,



to address illegal dumping. The committee asked that the Lead Member ensure that the promotion of the council's Recycling App is maximised.

Councillor Miller (Lead Member for Stronger Communities), The committee received a report **reviewing Trading Standards' role and priority areas**, as the budget for TS had reduced significantly in recent years, whilst demand had continued to increase. In questioning and discussion, the committee placed great emphasis on potential for invest-to-save opportunities for the service and the need for a commitment to protecting Brent's vulnerable residents. Specific questions were also asked regarding the service's scope to take enforcement action against ticket touts and whether it worked with the voluntary sector to raise awareness around fraud and scams, with the proliferation of online scams being noted, and questions asked on how the Trading Standards had evolved to respond to this trend. Discussing the rising number of acid attack incidents across the country, members questioned how the TS worked with Brent traders regarding the sale of chemicals used in such assaults.

The District Operations Manager for the Department for Work and Pensions presented a report on **employment and employability in Brent**, outlining the proposals to close the Willesden and Kilburn Job Centres and merge them with existing sites in Wembley and Harlesden. The committee questioned the purpose of the closures and sought to understand if cost or service redesign was the dominant factor. The committee also queried how accessible the online consultation process had been for vulnerable groups accessing services at the affected job centres. Members sought clarity regarding the scrutiny mechanisms in place for the DWP and questioned whether the DWP would be open to more local scrutiny and information sharing with Brent Council. The Chair of the Task Group on Food Banks sought commitment from the DWP to exploring and progressing the recommendations of the task group report.

Members also considered a report on **Wembley regeneration**, which provided an overarching view of the work and development being undertaken in Wembley. They asked questions on Quintain's business model for its Wembley Park development; the replacing of the pedestrian way (pedway) between Wembley Park underground station and Wembley Stadium; the community benefits being delivered by the Wembley Park regeneration; and the extent that the new developments met the Council's planning guidance.

Progress made against the recommendations of the Section 106 and Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) Task Group was reported, with thirteen actions categorised as green, ten as amber and one as red. Members commented on the lack of clarity around CIL and questions were raised regarding the possible uses and restrictions of S106 and CIL spending. It was also queried how the recommendations of the report accorded with the Council's planning objectives, and there was discussion about whether it was possible to use CIL to pay for building affordable housing.

A similar update was received on the **recommendations from the Devolution of Business Rates Task Group**. The Deputy Leader explained that in preparation for the anticipated devolution of business rates, London's local authorities were considering pooling business rates to provide a level of financial stability across the region. The committee questioned how the council addressed attempts by business owners to avoid paying business rates by dividing businesses into separate parts; and further queries were raised regarding the increased use of Wembley Stadium and how this affected the Stadium's business rates. The committee also questioned whether

Planning Policy would change to reinforce a desired mix of residential and business use in developments and highlighted that more could be done to enhance local partnerships.

The Lead Member for Regeneration, Growth, Employment and Skills presented an update report to the Committee on the **South Kilburn Regeneration Programme, Carlton & Granville Centres Site**, further to the committee considering the project in response to a call-in of Cabinet decisions taken on 15 November 2016.

The committee was pleased to note that stakeholders had been involved in the drafting and finalising of the brief for appointment of design teams and praised the consistent level of consultation throughout. Members subsequently discussed steps to boost public attendance at future consultation events and queried what lessons had been learned from the approach to consultation used.

## **8.2. Resources**

The committee received a **strategic overview of the council's funding**, setting out the main sources of local government funding and providing an illustration of the year on year reduction of local government core funding. In discussion Members raised questions on the Council's response to budgetary uncertainty. Clarity was sought on figures quoted and the challenges ahead, including the work being undertaken to identify ways to bridge the funding gap for 2019/20.

A report on **Community Access and Vulnerable People** detailed the key factors used to determine if a resident was considered vulnerable and provided an update on the former Community Access Strategy. The committee acknowledged that vulnerability could appear in many forms, but emphasised the importance of ensuring that the council was able measure its performance in supporting its most vulnerable residents. Members suggested a working group or task group be established to determine a way to define this cohort, drawing on outside expertise such as that provided by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

The council's Property service provided a **general introduction to the council's property and assets** for the committee, who questioned whether these were being maximised for the council's civic enterprise agenda, including being used as advertising space and how they were being used to meet the council's strategic objectives.

Members further queried whether the council had a strategy for identifying sites from within its own portfolio that would be suitable for development over the next few years. Clarification was sought regarding the financial arrangements with academy schools on council owned land. There was some concern that the council was not able to use its existing property portfolio in an innovative manner to address issues of urgent need in the borough; and the committee expressed its desire to pre-scrutinise the planned revision of the Council's Assets Strategy prior to its submission to Cabinet for approval.

## **8.3. Performance Policy and Partnerships**

**The Complaints Annual Report 2016 – 2017** was provided to the committee, covering performance in Brent Council and Brent Housing Partnership (BHP) for the period April 2016 to March 2017, including high level data for the previous two years

for comparison. The headlines of the report were discussed, including volume of complaints, the nature of and reasons for complaints.

Members welcomed the report but commented that it would be improved by the addition of comparative data for other authorities. The committee questioned the cost of complaints for the council, querying the size of the complaints team and the number of officer hours spent. Acknowledging the impact of central government's policy of austerity on local government services, the committee queried whether timescales for departmental responses had been adjusted to accommodate reduced resources and if so, whether this was communicated to Brent's residents.

The committee received a presentation on the outcomes and learning from the Council's first **Outcome Based Reviews (OBRs)** and the progress of three new OBRs. The first OBRs had been carried out in 2016 and had focussed on Housing for Vulnerable People, Employment Support, and Welfare Reform and Regeneration. The new OBRs focussed on Domestic Abuse, Edge of Care and Gangs.

There was discussion on how the OBRs were selected, how decisions were made about who should be consulted, and how and by whom the interface with people was managed. With regard to the Domestic Abuse OBR, the committee strongly emphasised the importance of early intervention. Discussing the OBR on gangs, the committee queried whether gang activity had increased in Brent, how the council currently worked to tackle this issue and how the outcomes of the OBRs would be monitored to assess their effectiveness.

Members discussed the **Digital Strategy and the customer experience**, receiving an overview of the Digital Strategy, approved by Cabinet in June 2017 and outlined the proposed Channel Strategy currently in development. In the subsequent discussion members questioned whether the council had undertaken appropriate research and queried whether the website could be accessed in different languages. Questions were also raised regarding response times with regard to emails and how to manage public expectations.

Members expressed support for the Harlesden Community Hub model but noted that issues had been raised regarding uniformity and quality of service due to the range of different partners contributing to its delivery. It was subsequently queried whether this issue was being monitored and addressed. Members also asked about contingencies should the council's IT infrastructure fail and queried what the council could do to expand the provision of high-speed broadband in the borough.

The committee received the **Safer Brent Partnership Annual Report and update on Community Safety**, welcoming the Deputy Borough Commander from the Metropolitan Police and the Chief Executive and chair of the Safer Brent Partnership, as well as the Lead Member for Stronger Communities and other key council officers. It questioned whether a reduction in resources was impacting any performance in the report and also whether any reduction in community policing was having an impact on intelligence gathering. Questions were also asked about street grooming and what was being done to ensure this was not occurring in Brent; as well as approaches to tackling prostitution gang activity, drug use and the notion of designing out crime in the public realm.

## **9. Task and Finish Groups**

### **9.1. Food Banks and Poverty Task Group Report**

A task group was convened to look at this area due to the significant rise in food bank usage nationally and lack of a detailed picture of food bank usage across Brent. Members were also concerned with the human impact food poverty is having on local communities and wanted to understand the scale and drivers of food poverty and food insecurity.

The task group was made up of members of the committee and other councillors, as well as expert advisors from relevant bodies including West London Business and the Child Poverty Action Group. It was also advised by the Trussell Trust. Concern was focused on vulnerable residents such as the elderly, disabled and children, for example the impact of hunger on children and young people's education. The task group also explored why individuals need to use food banks, and ways to tackle stigma associated with this. This included the impact of welfare reform changes from central government, unemployment, rising costs of living and low pay. There also exists a varying degree of regulation, safe guarding and data collection across different providers.

The task group considered that the impact of welfare changes such as Universal Credit could be far reaching, and that it was vital that the council and other local public sector partners put in place organisational arrangements that enable Brent to mitigate the impact Universal Credit as far in advance as possible. It made 36 individual recommendations, grouped into six discovery themes, which were reported to Cabinet. These themes were:

- Why people use food banks (triggers to financial crisis)
- Policy development
- Working in partnership – public, private and voluntary sector
- The user experience (Including the referral processes)
- Future models for food banks and community kitchens in Brent
- General and best practice.

### **9.2. Budget 2017/18 Scrutiny Panel Report**

This year's budget scrutiny task group was formed at the halfway point of a two-year budget. As a result, it undertook budget scrutiny in a slightly different way than in previous years. This included focusing on specific policies where it had concerns, rather than reviewing all spending plans (which last year's task group had already examined), as part of its legal duty to scrutinise the budget. Alongside this, the task group also looked at the impact of the plan to pool business rates across the London boroughs.

The task group was comprised of members from the three scrutiny committees and chaired by the Chair of the Resources and Public Realm Committee. It met three times, including a session attended by the Leader and Deputy Leader, to discuss the proposed pilot for pooled business rates in London. Relevant members of the Cabinet and senior officers also attended to inform discussions of the progress against savings

proposals from the existing budget. It was further advised by experts from London Councils, the Local Government Association, and the Department for Communities and Local Government.

The task group has made 12 individual recommendations, which were reported to Cabinet and Council as part of the consideration and passing of the budget.

## **10. Visits and engagement**

The Resources and Public Realm Scrutiny committee believes that visiting sites and speaking with service users where possible, provides a real first-hand insight when scrutinising these services.

The Resources and Public Realm committee made a few visits in 2017/18.

- Harlesden High Street (review of high street initiatives)
- Abbey Road, Brent Reuse and Recycling Centre (review of recycling rates)
- New development site in Wembley (Wembley regeneration)

## **Appendix 1**

### **Brent Council**

#### **Overview and Scrutiny Contacts**

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