

Resource and Public Realm Scrutiny Committee

Chair's Report – 15 January 2018

By Cllr Matt Kelcher

A happy new year to you all and welcome to the January 2019 meeting of the Resources and Public Realm Scrutiny Committee.

Our January meeting is always one of the most important meetings of the year as it focuses on the council's proposed budget, ahead of it being presented to full council in February.

I'm sure that this will be the most discussed issue at the meeting, but we also have other important business to get through. This report covers all of the items we will be investigating at the meeting and the work we have done in preparation outside of our public meeting. It also explains some recent changes to business that the committee was forced into.

Postponement of December meeting

As you may have noticed, we have not met publicly as a committee for some time. We had to postpone our originally scheduled December meeting as there were problems with the two substantive reports we were due to discuss.

a) Council Tax Support - Since the committee's annual work programme was initially agreed, the council has taken the decision not to implement a new Council Tax Support scheme until 2020. We originally scheduled this item to pre-scrutinise the proposals but as there currently are none we could not achieve this at this meeting. I've therefore rescheduled for May when there will be potential options for us to consider before they go to public consultation.

b) Annual Complaints Report – We have a constitutional obligation to review the annual complaints report. However, at a recent Corporate Management Team meeting the draft report was not agreed and amendments are under consideration. So as there is no final report for us to review there would be nothing to scrutinise at the meeting.

These issues left us with a very empty schedule with little time to bring forward other items on our workplan. I did not want to lose one of our six annual committee meetings or have a very short one which would leave us with too much to cram in later, so I took the decision to postpone until February when no meeting was originally scheduled. This will mean that all the items we have planned to scrutinise will get the time and analysis they need.

February meeting

The December meeting was initially postponed until the 11 February. However, following consultation with the council's Director of Legal and HR, we have had to make some adjustments to the Budget Scrutiny Panel process to become fully compliant with the constitution.

Part of this includes an addition to our committee's February agenda, whereby the committee must examine and discuss the final budget proposals to be detailed in a report to cabinet by the finance department at the very end of January 2019.

According to the constitution, the committee must then “make a note of its deliberations and send a note to cabinet for it to consider”. It transpired that Cabinet is also on the 11th of February, but unfortunately prior to the committee meeting, which meant that the February committee had to be rescheduled again because the exact sequencing of these events is crucial and cabinet cannot fall prior to the committee if the committee is to send a note to cabinet for its consideration.

Therefore, the only date that it was possible to reschedule the (new) February meeting for was Thursday 7 February. The only time that there was a boardroom available on that date at short notice was 7.30pm, hence the meeting being scheduled for that time on that date.

I realise this will cause problems for some, but if you can let me have any apologies as early as possible I’m sure we can arrange substitutions.

Food Banks Task Group Update Report

We usually review progress on each of our task groups six to twelve months after publication.

Therefore, an update report on the Food Banks Task Group recommendations has been added to the agenda for the February committee.

Knife Crime scoping

Our first duty tonight will be to approve the paper setting out the terms of reference for our next task group, which is due to investigate how the council can help to tackle knife crime in the borough.

This is a vitally important issue and I hope the task group – which I have appointed Cllr Sandra Kabir to chair – can begin its work as soon as possible and deliver some innovative recommendations for us all to consider.

Budget Scrutiny Panel Report

As mentioned above, discussion of the council’s budget is likely to take up a significant proportion of the meeting, given its vital importance.

The report in your papers was written by the Budget Scrutiny Panel (which I chaired) following three months of investigations and interviews. It is intended to be a starting point to the budget scrutiny process and to give committee members some prompts and topics they might like to raise at our public meeting.

But it is certainly not exhaustive and if members have concerns about other areas of the budget, they should feel free to raise them on the night.

Local Plan

Another important issue we will have a chance to pre-scrutinise at the meeting is the development of the council’s local plan. This is an important issue that we had no hesitation in adding to our forward plan at our first committee meeting.

To help members to understand more about the issue we held a briefing session on 2 January with Amar Dave, the strategic director with responsibilities in this area.

Affordable Housing Task Group

My huge thanks go to Cllr Neil Nerva for his efforts in chairing the first task group we undertook in this municipal year which investigated how the council can provide more affordable housing for Brent residents.

The final substantive item we will scrutinise tonight is the task group's final report. I look forward to hearing what additional ideas members have on this issue.