

Resources and Public Realm Scrutiny Committee

Chair's Report – 7 February 2018

By Cllr Matt Kelcher

Good evening and welcome to our February meeting of the Resources and Public Realm Scrutiny Committee.

Our meeting this evening is taking place on a different day and time to usual and I hope this does not cause too much inconvenience to members and officers. Unfortunately, the timing was unavoidable for reasons set out at length in the Chair's Report for January.

As ever, this report seeks to update members, and the public, about the work of the committee outside of our formal public meetings, and to offer an introduction to the topics we will discuss tonight.

Urgent decision

On 9 January I was contacted by Brent's Governance Department regarding an urgent decision the Chief Executive was due to take under her executive emergency powers.

The council's Access to Information rules state that proposed key decisions require 28 days' notice to be given via the forward plan. Where this is not possible, and the decision is classified as being so urgent as to prevent at least five clear days advance notice being given, the agreement of the chair of the relevant scrutiny committee (in this case Resources and Public Realm) - that the making of the decision is urgent and cannot be reasonably deferred - is required to enable the decision to be made.

This particular decision related to Brent remaining in the London business rates pooling system.

Brent agreed to be designated as a member of the pool and to participate in the 2018/19 100% business rates retention pilot. That pilot ends on 31 March and a new pilot is proposed from 1 April 2019 for the 2019-20 financial year.

The provisional local government finance settlement issued on 13 December confirmed that authorities have 28 days from this date to confirm if they wish to opt out. The government has signalled that should any of the 34 participants not continue in the pool, the 2019/20 pilot will not go ahead. This meant that Brent's had to give a response by 10 January 2019, or potential the whole city-wide pool would fold.

I therefore accepted the need for urgency in this case, and after a dialogue with officers where I asked further questions about the process of opting in or out, I was happy for the decision to proceed.

The January 2018 report of the Budget Scrutiny Panel, endorsed in full by the Resources and Public Realm committee, investigated the London-wide pooling of business rates. It was generally enthusiastic about the model, and potential benefits for Brent, and recommended that we take part.

I therefore believed that my actions here were fully consistent with the expressed view of Scrutiny in Brent.

Media coverage

The local media have given some coverage to the report of the Budget Scrutiny Panel, which we reviewed at our last meeting. Reports in both the [Brent and Kilburn Times](#), and the [Ealing Times](#) focussed on the Panel's recommendation that Brent lobby for a small "tourist tax" to be levied on visitors in Wembley to help compensate local people for the extra pressure they face on event days. Such a charge is commonplace on much of the continent and in the United States, but currently not permissible in UK law. The Panel believed that Brent Council should play a leading role in lobbying for change.

Whilst it was welcome that ideas coming out of scrutiny are getting coverage, I was slightly surprised that this was the main subject of interest for journalists when the report also covered a range of recommendations about local services which could be unilaterally implemented by the council. I hope they will cover some of these further ideas in the future.

The [Harrow Times](#) also reported from our January committee meeting, and in particular on the committee's relief that library closures are "off the table" for the time being.

Parking and electric car charging

The first substantive item on our February agenda is a look at what the council can do to ensure a good availability of parking places and electric car charging points in the borough. At our agenda-setting meeting at the start of the municipal year we were particularly interested in the latter point, as we felt that an increase in usage of electrical cars could help Brent to meet its clean air commitments.

At the time of writing we are also working with officers to look for other boroughs which may be examples of best practice in this regard, and to which we could conduct a reality checking visit.

Annual report on complaints

Every year, this annual report is sent to the Resources and Public Realm Committee for review. At the committee meeting we will also be interested to learn more about what the team have done to learn the lessons raised from the previous year's report.

Food banks task group update

A suitable period of time has now elapsed since our report into the use of food banks in Brent, and so it is appropriate to check on the progress made in implementing the recommendations in this report.

Budget proposals

Overview and scrutiny, through the Budget Scrutiny Panel, has already reviewed the cabinet's draft budget proposals. However, tonight is our opportunity to review the final document. At the meeting we will need to make clear our views on the final proposals so these can be sent back to cabinet. I urge all members to come fully prepared and focus on those proposals which are most controversial, so that we can achieve this.