

# **Resource and Public Realm Scrutiny Committee**

## **Chair's Report – March 2019**

### **By Cllr Matt Kelcher**

#### **a) Budget & recommendations**

In January, the final report of the Budget Scrutiny Panel - constituted by this committee - was published. This was based on an in-depth analysis of the draft budget proposals which were released for consultation at the end of the 2018.

You can read the full report [here](#)

We were pleased to note that when the final budget proposals were published, several of the recommendations in the Panel report were accepted. A few examples are given below.

- Taking reductions to library opening hours off the table. We believe that Brent's remaining libraries are valuable hubs offering customer services to residents, particularly young people in education. Given this borough's recent history with library closures, we also felt that a reduction in hours would undermine public trust in the service.
- Not proceeding with a move to fifteen-minute visits in care. Whilst we know many other authorities have taken this drastic step, we believe it should be a source of pride that Brent has not, and made it clear in our report that of all the seventy or so proposals in the draft budget we felt this should be the very last resort.
- Ensuring that the Abbey Road Household Recycling Centre is not completely shut. We believed it would be a clear false economy to pursue a reform which would give most residents in Brent no free and legal place in which to dispose of their household waste. This could only increase illegal dumping and the costs associated with it.

We were also pleased that the final budget report took some steps towards implementing our suggestion that the budget proposals be re-categorised to ensure better transparency and public understanding of the budget.

Initially, all proposals were listed together as cuts, and, I know from conversations with my constituents, that this means many people assume every single one of them is therefore a simple reduction in service. This is not the case. Of course there are proposals which are straight up cuts and cannot be dressed up in any other way - for example, the initial idea to close Abbey Road. However, other ideas in the budget are part of a long term reform process - with incidental savings - and we believe that local people should understand this.

Likewise, small efficiencies in the budget, such as reducing colour printing at the civic centre, cannot really be seen as in the same category as cuts which have an impact on frontline service users.

The final budget report listed how much money would come from each of these categories, and I hope that in future years the initial proposals will be categorised as such from the start of the process.

Following the publication of the final budget papers, our committee was required by the Brent constitution to send a further addendum to cabinet with our final deliberations. In this we highlighted some of the positive developments summarised above. In addition we then also listed the recommendations from the Panel report that we felt had not yet been addressed.

You can read this addendum [here](#)

I attended Cabinet on Monday 11 February to present this paper and press for clear answers on these points. I strongly believe that whenever any scrutiny committee makes a recommendation - in either our written reports, or officially in the minutes of or public meetings - the relevant Cabinet member should be required to give a written response back to the committee before its next meeting.

Of course, the Cabinet are free to reject our recommendations because they disagree with them, or think them impractical. However, I think at the very least we deserve a written response explaining why, and I would support any moves to confirm this in the council constitution.

Therefore, at the public meeting I gave Cabinet one month, until around 11 March, to respond to our outstanding points. I am hopeful of progress.

## **b) Agenda**

We are considering three substantive items at tonight's meeting.

As usual, we have arranged additional investigative work outside of the committee to help all members to understand the issue in context and have all of the information they need on the night. At the time of writing, the following investigations have been prepared.

### Contracts 2023

Many of the Council's major public contracts expire in 2023. This is a once in a generation opportunity for the council to set a complete new direction in how it delivers services.

We have arranged an in-depth briefing session on the matter for members on 13 March to help develop an understanding on the issue before asking questions on the night.

### Air quality pledges

Many of us made air quality pledges in the run up to the last council elections, so the committee wants to know how Brent is fulfilling these, and what else we can do.

To get a different perspective, and outside expertise, we have arranged a meeting for committee members with the local charity and lobby group Clean Air for Brent for 11 March.

### Recycling and flats

At a previous committee meeting, in the last municipal year, we investigated Brent's stalling recycling rates. One of the key issues we uncovered was that residents in flats find it much harder to recycle than those who live in houses.

I know that in my ward this particularly applies to those who live above the shops on Harlesden High Street who have no access to bins and can only leave out recycling bags at certain times of the day. We want to understand these barriers and how the council can improve them.

I have therefore emailed all councillors, of all parties, in Brent to ask them for examples in their wards of problems with recycling in flats. I will share these with members of the committee so that we can get a full picture of the situation in Brent.

## **c) External witnesses**

Members may have seen that the FA recently commissioned Deloitte to review the economic impact of Wembley stadium on our borough.

You can read the full report [here](#)

On 15 April we're calling in witnesses from the FA and Deloitte to give evidence about this report at our public committee meeting. I think it will be of much public interest.

#### **d) Training and development**

Three years ago I completed a national Local Government Association course on effective scrutiny at Warwick Business School. This was very valuable to me as a newly elected scrutiny chair and I picked up many ideas for reform I brought back to Brent.

In January 2019 I repeated the course and was pleased to see that things have changed for the better. People from other councils were now very excited by what we're doing in Brent. In the weeks following the course, the council have received requests from other authorities for more information on ideas I shared during the course, particular around how we ensure process of agenda setting is member led.