

Chair's Report

Resources and Public Realm Scrutiny Committee

July 2020

Tonight's meeting

I look forward to welcoming councillors and local residents to the Resources and Public Realm Scrutiny Committee's first ever virtual committee meeting on 14 July 2020.

We would obviously prefer to be meeting in person, but I am pleased that thanks to the wonders of modern technology, and the hard work and dedication of our council support team, we are able to do the next best thing and host an online meeting tonight. This will also ensure our work continues to be open and accessible to the public.

As I am sure our residents would expect, tonight's agenda focuses exclusively on how the council has adapted to the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, and how we are planning to help our people and businesses to bounce back.

Our first item focuses on the public realm of Brent. All of us in the borough will have noticed physical changes take place to our streets and parks to react to the new normal of social distancing. In my own ward, along the Harlesden High Street pavements have been extended to allow for people to safely queue at bus stops, for example. Some of these changes will be temporary, others will have much longer consequences. It is therefore important for our committee to analyse these changes, suggest further adaptations, and help the council to plan for this new reality in the medium and longer term.

Secondly, we will be looking at how the local authority can support local businesses, the high street and employment. There is now doubt that our thriving small business ecosystem has taken a massive hit due to lockdown. It should be all of our goals to ensure that as many of these businesses as possible bounce back, as soon as possible. Councils can play a key role in delivering this aim, so it is therefore our responsibility as a committee to scrutinise the plans that the Cabinet have in place, and suggest additional ideas where appropriate.

Linked to this, our final item will look at the welfare implications of this crisis. No matter how many businesses we help to save, it seems clear that the country is heading towards a recession and levels of unemployment not seen since the 1980s. This will only add to the burden on our already strained welfare systems. It is absolutely vital that Brent has a plan to deal with this – as the futures of our most vulnerable residents are at stake. We hope to play our role in developing such a plan at this meeting.

Scrutiny during COVID

Our last meeting was due to be held in April, just as the full force of lockdown was taking effect. At the time the council did not have the full technology required to run a virtual meeting, and our officers were being re-deployed to fight the outbreak on the front line. We therefore agreed to postpone the meeting at that time.

However, over the past few months, backbenchers across the council have been taking advantage of a range of opportunities to oversee and scrutinise the work of the council and hold the cabinet to account. These opportunities included, but were not limited to:

Audit Committee – Under the council’s constitution, this committee leads on scrutinising emergency planning and powers. I watched their meeting on 5 May where they held the Chief Executive to account for over an hour and scrutinised the actions taken by the authority so far.

Budget scrutiny – One of the most important roles of the Resources and Public Realm Scrutiny Committee is to oversee the budget setting process of the council. There is no doubt that the period of lockdown, and of fighting the virus, will have a huge impact on our finances, and that many of the budget assumptions we analysed in January and February are already out of date. We therefore organised a special budget scrutiny session on 27 May where members of the committee were able to question senior officers and the Leader and Deputy Leader of the Council about the financial implications of COVID-19.

Health and Wellbeing Board – This is another important arm of oversight into local health provision in our borough. Their meeting on 29 June particularly looked at the local COVID response and the disproportionate impact that has had on some of our local BAME communities. Members of the committee, and other backbenchers participated in this meeting.

Webcast briefings – During the crisis the council have held weekly briefing webcasts, where backbenchers can ask questions of the authority’s whole senior leadership team. On average around 60 questions have been tabled and answered at each of these meetings, allowing members to raise concerns at every step of the response.

Lead member briefs – Members of the cabinet have held regular online briefing sessions, where councillors could dial in to ask them questions about the work of their department during the crisis. Personally, I found the session on what each department needed to do to come out of lockdown to be particularly interesting and helpful.

Despite all of these opportunities it is great to know that the committee will be meeting, as closely as possible, in its conventional way on 14 July. This forms part of a bumper month for council meetings and oversight, including meetings of the Community Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee, Audit and Full Council.

Work plan

At the beginning of every municipal year, we attempt to set the committee's work plan in a collaborative way, taking on board ideas for cabinet members, officers and backbenchers – with the whole committee having the final say together.

This was made harder by the conditions of lockdown, but we were able to utilise video conferencing technology to still work together to set in a collaborative way. You can find our latest plan in the papers for this meeting.

Budget correction

It has been brought to my attention that there was an inaccuracy in the Budget Scrutiny Panel report that we published in January. Specifically, a paragraph on page 17 stated that:

'Our ability to generate income is limited by legislation in some areas. For example, we are currently barred from charging motorcyclists to park in resident parking bays and pay and display bays. This seems unfair as motorbikes still contribute to poor air quality (albeit to a lesser degree than cars) and they should therefore be liable to some charges. We would urge Brent to work with other boroughs, through London Councils and the LGA, to lobby for the powers to levy proportionate charges on parked motorcycles.'

This was based on information presented to us during one of our evidence gathering sessions. The way this was written up in the report would clearly give the impression that the council could not legally require residents to pay for a permit to park a motorcycle in a resident parking bay outside of their home.

To be clear, this is not the case. For a long time, it was simply impractical for the council to require parked motorcycles to carry a permit, because all permits issued were in paper form and could not easily be affixed to a motorcycle in the same way as a car. With the instigation of electronic permits for resident parking, this is no longer the case.

However, the council would still need to be mindful of the broad legislative framework around parking charges. This clearly states that parking charges cannot be initiated solely to raise revenue, but must be in response to evidence that a charge is required to properly manage parking space in the neighbourhood.

I have met with officers in the parking team who indicate that the majority of complaints they receive around motorcycle parking are actually around pavement parking where the council can (and does) levy penalty charge notices to those caught parking in this anti-social way. I would strongly urge any local people or resident's associations who feel they have a strong problem with motorcycle parking on their street to contact the council so they have the evidence base to respond with either specific motorcycle bays, or CPZ charges for resident motorcycles.

I understand that the Cabinet will be considering their wider policy in this area, and reviewing whether there is a need to consider permit charges for resident motorcycles. There are clearly arguments for and against this policy.

On the pro side, it does seem incongruous that, as things stand, a resident with a small electric car – which does not emit carbon when it drives – is charged a small fee for a permit, but the driver of a motorbike, which emits some pollution, does not.

The lack of motorcycle-specific resident bays also means that these bikes can currently take up significant road space in some streets without contributing to the administration of the CPZ.

On the con side, Brent has rightly taken the bold step of keeping the price of its cheapest parking permit at the low price of £25. By comparison, Hackney, which also levies resident permit charges on motorcycles, has a minimum price of £60. Brent has done this so that we can strongly incentivise people to buy the lowest polluting cars (the less polluting your car is, the less you pay). It is unlikely that any charging regime we could create that not have motorcycles in the lowest category and therefore only liable for a £25 charge.

This could create a perverse incentive for motorcyclists to upgrade to a small car as they would no longer be making a saving – at least in terms of parking – by using a motorcycle or scooter instead.

This is clearly an interesting issue, with good arguments on either side. The committee therefore might like to explore the matter further and ask for any paper on the idea to be brought back to us for pre-scrutiny later in the year.

In the meantime, I have been glad to have the opportunity to correct the record through this chair's report.

Cllr Matt Kelcher
Chair, Resources and Public Realm Scrutiny Committee