



MINUTES OF THE RESOURCES AND PUBLIC REALM SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
Held in the Conference Hall, Brent Civic Centre on Wednesday 24 January 2024 at 6.00pm

PRESENT: Councillor Conneely (Chair), Councillor Long (Vice-Chair) and Councillors Aden, Ahmadi Moghaddam, Akram, S Butt, Georgiou, Molloy, Mitchell and J Patel.

Also Present: Councillor M Butt (Leader of the Council), Councillor Tatler (Deputy Leader, Cabinet Member for Finance, Resources & Reform and Cabinet Member for Regeneration, Planning & Growth) and Councillor Ketan Sheth (Chair of the Community and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee).

1. Apologies for Absence and Clarification of Alternate Members

Apologies were received from Councillor Miller and Councillor Shah, with Councillor Molloy attending as an alternate member on behalf of Councillor Miller.

2. Declarations of interests

No declarations of interest were made at the meeting.

3. Order of Business

The Chair agreed to vary the order of business on the agenda to allow the Scrutiny Progress Update – Recommendations Tracker to be considered first. The minutes therefore reflect the order in which the items were dealt with at the meeting.

4. Minutes of the Previous Meeting

It was **RESOLVED** that the minutes of the previous meetings held on 26 October 2023, Tuesday 7 November 2023 and 18 December 2023 be approved as a correct record.

In referencing the minutes of the meeting held on 26 October 2023, Councillor Georgiou sought an update regarding the review of the Barham Park Trust Accounts conducted by the Chief Executive. In response, the Committee was advised that the views of the Chief Executive and the outcome of the review was detailed at the Barham Park Trust Committee meeting held on 24 January 2024, with both the meeting and documents accessible to the public.

5. Matters Arising (if any)

As this was their last meeting in supporting the Committee, the Chair thanked Natalie Connor for their hard work and the support provided to the Committee, with all members joining the Chair in wishing Natalie the best in their future endeavours.

6. Scrutiny Progress Update – Recommendations Tracker

The Chair advised that all responses on the recommendations tracker were up to date, with the Committee expecting further updates from Planning in February and April 2024. Following their introduction, the Chair invited questions and comments from the Committee regarding the recommendations and any responses received, with the subsequent discussion summarised below:

- The Committee highlighted the recently published census data on empty properties in the borough, which recognised a much larger number than the Council's previous estimations, and queried how the Council was intending to use this data to maximise income generation given the financial pressures faced by all local authorities. In response, members noted that a written response would be provided by the Corporate Director of Resident Services prior to the Committee's next meeting, however, the Committee was advised that the Council was contacting landlords regarding the issue.
- In response to a question concerning the support that ward councillors could provide in identifying empty properties, the Committee was informed that ward councillors could contact either the Cabinet Member for Housing, Homelessness and Renters Security or the Corporate Director of Resident Services to report any concerns. Nevertheless, it was emphasised that identifying empty properties was also vital for the purpose of housing residents in addition to maximising the Council's income. Additionally, the Committee heard that the Office for National Statistics (ONS) acknowledged the possibility that data from the most recent census was likely atypical due to being conducted during the coronavirus pandemic, as many residents were absent from the borough.
- Although appreciating the finite resources available within the Council which meant that the recommendation to undertake a cumulative equality impact assessment of the budget decisions since 2018 was not feasible, the Committee expressed disappointment in the manner in which this decision was communicated and welcomed a more collaborative process in the future. Furthermore, as evaluating the impact of budget cuts would inform future work of the Committee, the Chair explained that the recommendation would remain on the tracker and invited alternative proposals for reviewing the impact of budget decisions. In recognising the importance of implementing the Committee's recommendations where possible, Councillor Tatler welcomed proposals for a more collaborative feedback mechanism between Cabinet and the Committee.

7. Safer Brent Partnership Annual Report 2022-23

Will Lexton-Jones (Detective Superintendent, Northwest Borough Command Unit, Metropolitan Police and Chair of the Safer Brent Partnership) introduced the report, which detailed the activities undertaken by the Safer Brent Partnership to support the agreed priorities during 2022-2023. In providing members with further context regarding their role within the Metropolitan Police and as Chair of the Safer Brent Partnership (SBP), Will Lexton-Jones explained that they were the senior officer in charge of Brent following the new structure within the Metropolitan Police introduced to ensure that each borough had a designated responsible officer and had assumed Charing responsibilities for the SBP in late 2023 on a rolling basis. In focussing on their role as SBP Chair, Will Lexton-Jones outlined that the Chair's

duty was to ensure that the Partnership was held accountable and that the Partnership priorities were delivered. To conclude, the Committee was advised that the new Safer Brent Community Safety Strategy was formed by a public health approach which relied upon early intervention and prevention, and given that they had only assumed the role of SBP Chair relatively recently, praise was given to the work of officers, Councillor Farah (Cabinet Member for Safer Communities and Public Protection) and Carolyn Downs (former Chief Executive, Brent Council) for their efforts in leading the SBP and developing the new Community Safety Strategy.

In adding to the comments of Will Lexton-Jones, Councillor Farah emphasised the importance of collaborative working with statutory partners, the voluntary and community sector and neighbouring boroughs as it was stated that no single agency could deliver the priorities of the SBP. Furthermore, Councillor Farah commended the work of the SBP over the previous year and reiterated the ambitious goals of the new Community Safety Strategy which was scheduled to be considered at Cabinet in February 2024. In finalising the introduction of the report, Kibibi Octave (Director of Communities, Brent Council) explained that due to the timescales between now and when the previous Annual Report had been considered by the Committee, the 2022-23 Report did not cover a full calendar year. However, the Committee noted that future reporting periods would aim to cover a full calendar year to enable members to review the progress of the Safer Brent Partnership and Community Safety Team more effectively.

During the consideration of the agenda item, the following key points were discussed:

- In response to a query regarding the community engagement undertaken for the new Community Safety Strategy, particularly with impacted communities, the Committee was informed that information was shared via the Police's public platform which allowed residents to view borough and ward crime rates. Moreover, members noted that Safer Neighbourhood Board's held public meetings, in which the Police attended, which enabled public scrutiny regarding the delivery of local priorities. Lastly, it was explained that the Police held encounter panels which reviewed the use of force and stop and search.
- Regarding the issue of increased visibility of Police in hot spot areas, the Committee was advised that resources were limited and therefore if all engagement resources were used to increase the number of officers on patrol, it would not effectively increase public engagement as the probability of having meaningful engagement whilst officers were on patrol was low. Rather, members heard that engagement was better driven by providing a specific time and place in which the public could be guaranteed an opportunity to express their views. However, the Committee's concerns relating to visibility was recognised and members were reassured that work was underway to ensure that officer shifts reflected demand and to get more senior officers into the communities they served.
- In discussing the number of Community Triggers in Brent and the outcomes of these Triggers, members were informed that approximately 20 Community Triggers had occurred within the reporting period, which commenced when residents felt that their case had not been managed by the appropriate agency. Community Triggers were led by the Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB)

Team, and it was explained that a review of the case would occur even if the case did not meet the qualifying threshold. The Committee noted that many Community Trigger cases related to individuals in private properties and housing associations, with a working tracker and action plan required for each case to ensure that additional resources were targeted towards ongoing issues and that a positive outcome was achieved. Regarding resident and councillor awareness of Community Triggers, members were advised that further engagement could be undertaken to improve awareness of the process in the borough.

- The Committee sought further information regarding additions to the new Community Safety Strategy as a result of engagement work. In response, members were informed that the overarching Two Year Action Plan was created as a result of community engagement, with engagement including Pupil Referral Units, drug and alcohol abuse support services at Cobbold Road, the College of Northwest London, staff LGBTQ+ networks and Brent's Multi-Faith Forum. Members noted that the Action Plan was agreed at the most recent SBP meeting, with each action being assigned a dedicated responsible delivery group.
- In response to a query relating to the implementation of the public health-led Community Safety Strategy, the Committee noted that the public health approach was spearheaded by early intervention and prevention programmes, in addition to refreshed benchmarks arising from updated monitoring of intervention, prevention and public confidence. To reflect the work of the new Strategy, it was explained that the next Annual Report would include the new monitoring indicators.
- Regarding the allocation and impact of Town Centre Safer Neighbourhood Teams, the Committee was informed that both Willesden and Wembley had a dedicated Town Centre Safer Neighbourhood Team, with no intentions to change the allocation of Town Centre Teams due to current demand. In discussing the impact of Town Centre Safer Neighbourhood Teams, it was detailed that reductions in offences were seen within and nearby town centres as a result of the targeted resources. Whilst exact statistics could be provided in a written response, it was emphasised that the Town Centre Safer Neighbourhood Teams were not the sole resource being dedicated to hot spots, with a dedicated team in Northwest London focussed on proactively reducing crime.
- Concerning the displacement of crime as a result of targeting hot spots, members were provided an explanation of Operation Nightingale which was a Home Office funded programme aimed at reducing serious violence. The data evaluating the impact of Operation Nightingale indicated that, whilst some crime was displaced, the majority of crime was diffused which suggested that targeting hot spots resulted in overall positive outcomes. Nevertheless, it was noted that Operation Nightingale was in its final financial year, with uncertainty around the future of the programme.
- Regarding the Total Notifiable Offences Map included within section 2.6 of the cover report, members were advised that this data was sourced from the

Metropolitan Police open public data at ward level, which resulted in particular hot spots within wards not being visible at the ward-level map. Thus, the map did not effectively reflect hot spots which drove the allocation of Town Centre Safer Neighbourhood Teams. Furthermore, the Committee noted that Town Centre Safer Neighbourhood Teams were designed to mitigate enduring high crime levels which required strategic patience to witness positive results.

- Having highlighted the increase of knife crime in Brent, particularly with victims under 25, the Committee queried what was being done to better understand the drivers of knife crime and to address the issue. In agreeing that more emphasis was required to address the increasing occurrence of knife-related offences, officers detailed that the tri-borough approach split focus and resources and therefore increased the difficulty of reducing offences. Nevertheless, the Committee was informed that there was beginning to be a move away from the gangs matrix in the Metropolitan Police as it was said to hyper-focus officers on whether serious violence was gang-related, which reduced the Police's effectiveness in reducing this category of crime. Furthermore, members heard that the Council was undertaking work to increase understanding regarding the normalisation of knife carrying and to demonstrate and reduce the impact of knife crime through engagement with schools, parents, victims and perpetrators and by installing knife bins and delivering bleed kit training. However, officers recognised that further preventative work could be conducted to reduce knife crime, with the Committee requesting that this was acknowledged in the new Community Safety Strategy given the acute need to tackle the issue.
- The Committee was advised that ethnicity data was not included in the most recent Annual Report as access to Police data systems was revoked and therefore the 2022-23 Report was produced with limited scope. However, members noted that access to a limited dataset had recently been granted which contained information concerning victim and perpetrator ethnicity which could be included in future reporting.
- In response to a query as to why the new priorities did not include a dedicated priority to reduce knife and gang-related crime, it was explained that partners needed to ensure that all serious violence was reduced, not just a specific subset of serious violence. Moreover, the limited resources available to both the Council and partners was reiterated, in addition to the need to explore multiple interventions to address the issue. Consequently, the importance of partnership working and engaging impacted communities was emphasised, which was done through supporting parents, collaborating with the voluntary and community sector, working with victims and accessing opportunities to liaise with housing and resident associations.
- Members noted that the ambition was to implement the first knife bins in March 2024.
- In discussing the importance of targeting resources to support the most impacted communities, the Committee heard that the Council was in the process of establishing a Violence Reduction Steering Group, which would assist with targeting resources and delivering the commitment to co-design an

action plan within 3 days of serious violent incidents to provide reassurance to impacted communities, which was welcomed by members.

- The Committee sought further information concerning the correlation between the reduction of youth provision, such as youth centres, and the substantial increase in knife crime with victims under 25. In response, members noted that there was a close correlation between increases in knife crime and the closure of youth-focussed services. This correlation started to become profound in the mid 2010's, with knife crime steadily increasing since 2015. Although recognising that correlation was not akin to causation, with other factors also contributing such as reductions in Police capacity and young people more likely to be out in the community, it was detailed that more incidents were often seen in school holidays when young people did not have structured activities. It was suggested that the issue could be addressed via greater community outreach in hot spots and earlier interventions during school holidays.
- In recognising the importance of addressing the issue of knife crime despite the financial pressures faced by the Council, members were advised that the voluntary and community sector welcomed further collaboration to maximise the grant funding coming into Brent to improve the borough's safety. However, in response to a query relating to the utilisation of Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) funding to aid projects that tackled the issue of knife crime, the Committee noted that CIL funded projects were required to comply with planning and government set regulations which therefore reduced the appropriateness of this funding stream to reduce knife crime. Nevertheless, the opportunity to promote community grants towards organisations that delivered youth intervention and diversion programmes was highlighted.
- Given that the majority of the Community Safety Team were funded by external grants, members sought assurances that available resources would be set aside to apply for external funding to ensure that the capacity of the Council was maintained, and that further funding was secured to deliver early interventive and preventive programmes. In response, it was detailed that both the Council and Police continued to apply for external funding opportunities.
- In referencing the cover report which stated that Brent was in the top 4 boroughs for individuals linked to county lines, members questioned what the main challenges were regarding the issue and whether any improvements could be implemented in the Council to assist in addressing county lines-related activities. In response, it was explained that the Rescue and Response Team was a pan-London team funded through MOPAC. However, MOPAC was altering the model for the Rescue and Response Team to include all exploitation, not just county lines. Therefore, the Council was currently reviewing whether commitments could be made to the new model given the current resource pressures. Furthermore, it was stated that Brent was usually ranked 4th to 5th in most crime categories and thus it was not surprising to see Brent's placement in relation to county lines. In discussing interventions, members were advised that individuals and families were supported through the Council's Exploitation, Violence and Vulnerability Panel (EVVP), as many members of the same family were often known to the Council and partners. In finalising, the Committee heard that data regarding referrals to EVVP and

known individuals related to county lines had to be handled with caution, as low numbers may point to individuals being missed by agencies and high numbers suggested that the issue was worse than expected, highlighting the importance of analysing the quality of the data held.

- In response to a query regarding their views on community safety in Brent, Kim Wright (Chief Executive, Brent Council) expressed confidence in the new Community Safety Strategy as the priorities had been shaped by community feedback and informed by data, which would make the most difference in preventing crime and reducing the community impact of crime.
- Although commending the reduction in domestic violence, which was larger than the reduction seen across London, the Committee highlighted that this type of crime was often underreported and therefore sought further information regarding data on the most impacted cohorts and targeted interventions catered towards the LGBTQ+, Irish Traveller and disabled communities. In response, members were advised that the Violence Against Women and Girls Forum informed the Council of underreporting and advocated on behalf of the most impacted communities, with officers recognising the need to undertake further outreach for these communities. In addressing each community identified above, the Committee noted the particular challenges presented when supporting victims in these communities. For example, disabled individuals may struggle with accessing support as they may rely on carer assistance, with the carer sometimes being the abuser. Thus, reviews were necessary to ensure that information was communicated through frontline staff such as GP's, adult social care and nurses. Regarding the LGBTQ+ community, it was detailed that engagement was conducted with service users from this community at Cobbold Road and the charity Galop supported LGBTQ+ individuals and increased awareness of support through discrete advice and information cards. Nevertheless, it was emphasised that further creativity and exploration was required to reach seldom heard communities. Concerning domestic violence data, the Committee noted that approximately 70% of offender data was missing due to complications around fear of reporting and therefore instilling confidence in reporting was deemed crucial for improving datasets. Moreover, it was stated that further work could be undertaken to collect more detailed data on specific communities, and members noted that large scale datasets, such as the British Crime Survey, were important sources of comparative data.
- Regarding the statistics relating to the ADVANCE IDVA and Family Support Services outlined in paragraph 3.39 of the report, members were advised that children's social care often referred to ADVANCE if they were on a Child In Need Plan which was the reason for the 100% satisfaction scores as engagement tended to be very good which resulted in the benefits of the programme being realised. However, officers recognised that improvements could be made to increase engagement for other cohorts via the Council's Domestic Abuse Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference. In response to a query concerning the forms of communication in which ADVANCE referrals were contacted, members heard that contact was initially made via phone calls which would then lead to face-face interaction. However, it was stated that a detailed breakdown could be provided if necessary.

- In highlighting that impact data for community programmes and initiatives such as the 'She is Summit' and the 'Perpetrator Intervention Programme' was limited or omitted from the report, the Committee requested that future reports contained specific impact evaluations for programmes to provide reassurance to the Committee regarding activities and outcomes.
- Having mentioned the rising number of incidents of violence against women and girls occurring at Wembley Stadium and Wembley Arena events, members sought further information on the preventative approach to reduce these incidents and stakeholder engagement to increase awareness of the issue. In response, members were informed that contact had been made with the FA to raise staff awareness and deliver training to identify situations of concern and intervene accordingly. Furthermore, partners were exploring the implementation of QR codes in venues to report concerns. Moreover, the increase in violence against women and girls was being analysed on a wider scale, with reviews ongoing regarding the night time economy, improvements being made to local CCTV and further training for staff to identify concerning behaviour and intervene prior to a possible incident.
- In response to a query regarding the categorisation of hate crime detailed in paragraph 5.4 of the report, the Committee heard that the categorisations were set by the Police, with the difference between 'racist crime' and 'racist and religious crime' being the perception of the crime from agencies and victims, with incidents being categorised as 'racist and religious crime' if it was uncertain what motivated the substantive offence, whereas 'racist crime' was recorded when the motivation was clearer.
- Regarding the communities most impacted by hate crime, the Committee noted that once further access was provided to Police databases, data on particular demographics could be provided in future reports. Nevertheless, although it was not included in the report due to the differing reporting periods, it was detailed that since the conflict in the Middle East, approximately 17% of hate crime was recorded as antisemitic which represented a 10x increase since the quarter prior to the conflict. Additionally, the Committee noted that there had been an increase in Islamophobic crimes that was not necessarily reflected in official statistics due to underreporting.
- To provide further context to the Committee, it was explained that hate crime had to be related to a substantive offence and therefore it was an aggravating factor, it was not the main type of crime such as assault or abuse. Furthermore, the recording of hate crime relied on the subjective perception of the victim which often resulted in low detection rates.
- The Committee heard that the Police were reviewing every recorded hate crime to ensure that the responses met standards and the victim had been sufficiently supported, with further resources allocated to the issue given the recent increases in hate crime.
- In response to a query on how the public health approach was being implemented to reduce hate crime, members were advised that this was largely done via Prevent funding as the Council did not have a dedicated hate

crime officer. It was explained that the Council's work relied on engagement with schools, the voluntary and community sector and the Multi Faith Forum to increase awareness of hate crime and the changing landscape following the conflict in the Middle East. Concerning the impact of engagement, it was stated that more incidents tended to occur in areas in which engagement offers were not taken up.

- Regarding Council and partner responses to far right extremism, members noted that far right extremism had not been identified as a particular issue during the current reporting period, with an increase in mixed and unclear ideologies instead. Nevertheless, the Committee heard that the Council continued to commission providers to deliver training and engagement on extreme ideologies, although it was recognised that further work could be undertaken with Eastern European communities. On a wider scale, it was explained that ring wing extremism had only recently begun to have strategic resources allocated to it, as a specific ideology had to be defined as the basis for an action prior to allocating further resources to tackle it.
- In highlighting that the number of people reoffending in London continued to increase, members queried whether entering unsuitable accommodation on their release from prison led to instability and consequently reoffending. In response, the issue of housing upon prison release was recognised as a pressing issue, with the Council working to establish an early notification system to the Housing Team prior to release to ensure that suitable accommodation was sourced and ready at the time of release. However, often individuals could not sustain their tenancies which required partnership and multi-agency working to resolve, and the Council was reviewing the placement of ex-offenders as placing a large number of ex-offenders in a single locality was often unhelpful in sustaining tenancies and leading lawful lives. Nevertheless, the challenges regarding sourcing suitable housing were highlighted such as availability, affordability and eligibility, with the Council working with partner organisations and the Probation Service to support ex-offenders to rehabilitate.
- In referencing paragraph 6.8 of the report, which stated that cuckooing persisted to be an issue in Brent, members queried what was being done regarding the issue and whether alternative interventions were being explored. In response, The Committee was informed that cuckooing was a specific focus across Adult Social Care, Public Health, Housing and Community Safety, with work ongoing to further understand cuckooing and how to effectively tackle it. Regarding options explored by the Council and partners, members noted that reviews were underway regarding sensitive letting and sourcing suitable accommodation as many cuckooing victims would benefit from supported housing, rapid panels were being discussed to respond within 24 hours to an incident, referrals were being made to the Community MARAC and partial and full closure orders were being used when deemed necessary to restrict access to properties of concern. However, it was explained that cuckooing would not be included in the wider exploitation programme developed out of the country lines programme funded by MOPAC.
- Regarding the low staff and partner attendance at the Integrated Offender Management Panel meetings, the Committee was advised that this was

caused by resource pressures. However, efforts were ongoing to increase engagement through prioritising when specific partners were required at meetings to better utilise resources. Furthermore, it was suggested to review how meetings were scheduled to minimise the resource burden for all involved.

- Having highlighted the difficulties of taking enforcement action regarding ASB in private properties caused by owner occupiers, members queried what actions could be taken against such individuals. In response, it was detailed that the Council could issue Community Protection notices, Fixed Penalty Notices and closure orders as owner occupiers could be displaced for a maximum of 3 months. However, officers recognised the increased difficulty of dealing with issues arising from the actions of owner occupiers, but it was reiterated that enforcement was still possible, as a closure order was successfully utilised on an owner occupier last year.
- In response to a query regarding obstructions to CCTV cameras, members noted that the responsible contractor was required to undertake checks of CCTV cameras to ensure that obstructions did not occur. Furthermore, the Parks Team trimmed branches where encroaches occurred and reviews were conducted prior to installation to ensure the effectiveness of each camera. Regarding the installation of cameras in parks, it was explained that there was some scope to explore this, but detection was more challenging in parks and therefore cameras would be less effective.
- Given that Brent Housing Management (BHM) CCTV was not aligned to the Council's central control room, the Committee questioned whether there were plans to align the two systems. In response, members were advised that there was encouragement from both BHM and the Council to align CCTV cameras on new build estates, with systems integrated on developments such as Alexandra Court, with the Council exploring further opportunities where possible. Going forward, it was the expectation that new build developments would have their CCTV systems integrated into the main control room, which would be financed by BHM following resident consultation, as residents had to agree to the changes given it would impact service charges.

In closing the discussion, the Chair thanked officers and members for their contributions towards the scrutiny of the item, before summarising the outcomes of the discussion and additional actions, which were **AGREED** as follows:

Suggestions for Improvement

- (1) To share more information and brief Members on the Community Trigger to help them understand how to support their residents to use it.
- (2) To ensure there is a clear priority around Tackling Violent Crime, including Knife Crime in the Community Safety Strategy.
- (3) To have a greater focus on targeting youth violence through grants programmes.

- (4) To collaborate with the Safer Brent Partnership to access funding from the VRU and similar grant funding routes.
- (5) To work with the Police and Safer Brent Partnership to improve the granularity and quality of data and impact assessments, with the aim of presenting the impact of crime and criminality on specific communities. This consists of sharing and reporting more granular data around the key priority areas of the report e.g. domestic violence and violent crime.
- (6) Maintain the current level of resource in the Community Safety Team.

Information Requests

- (1) The timeframe for implementing the response at Wembley Stadium and Wembley Arena to support the victims of sexual violence with reporting.

4. Budget Scrutiny Task Group Findings

As Councillor Conneely was Chair of the Budget Scrutiny Task Group and would present the report, chairing responsibilities for the item were delegated to Councillor Long, Vice Chair of the Resources and Public Realm Scrutiny Committee. Following the transfer of chairing responsibilities, Councillor Conneely was then invited to present the report to the Committee.

To begin, Councillor Conneely thanked Councillors Ketan Sheth, Molloy, Smith and Jayanti Patel for their work as part of the Budget Scrutiny Task Group, before detailing that the upcoming financial year would be the most challenging year in terms of financial stability for local authorities across the country as a result of cumulative funding cuts from central government. Consequently, Councillor Conneely outlined that it was difficult for the Task Group to suggest alternative proposals due to the limited resources available to the Council. In emphasising the need for wholesale reforms to the manner in which local authorities were funded, Councillor Conneely reiterated the importance of partnership working and collaboration to achieve shared goals and deliver priorities. To conclude, the Committee was advised that due to the recommendations made by the Task Group, Cabinet had revised their decision to close the New Millenium Day Centre, which would now remain open through a multi-service offer.

Following Councillor Connelly's introduction, contributions, comments and questions were sought from the Committee, with the subsequent discussion summarised below:

- The Committee highlighted the lack of consultation regarding the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and given its importance as a revenue stream for the Council, queried whether engagement and consultation should be held on a more frequent basis, such as via resident and tenant boards. In response, members were advised that engagement and consultation was undertaken yearly with residents and stakeholders regarding the HRA. Furthermore, concerning the budget proposals for the upcoming financial year, members were reassured that partners and stakeholders had been contacted to encourage feedback, meetings had been offered to discuss the proposals and residents had been engaged where possible, with the Council

commencing the consultation in November 2023 to ensure stakeholders had sufficient opportunity to provide feedback, ahead of many councils across the country.

- In response to the recommendation to condense the budget engagement material to improve the accessibility of the documents, members were informed that this would be explored, but it was emphasised that all relevant information needed to be provided to ensure transparency and accountability. Furthermore, the Committee noted that the Council was restricted regarding when engagement could commence due to the current trend of single-year settlements. It was explained that once multi-year settlements had been established engagement could begin earlier.
- In recognising the efforts of officers in preparing the draft budget for consultation at such an early stage in the process, members queried the role that ward councillors could have in spreading awareness of the budget proposals and seeking feedback to further support the engagement efforts of the Council.
- In response to Recommendation 2, to develop clear and concise proposals, the Committee was informed that the budget process was an iterative task which was further complicated by the recent trend of single-year settlements, which introduced uncertainty regarding the Council's future funding position. Thus, given that the Council did not have ample time between receiving their settlement and drafting the budget proposals, it was explained that continuous reviews of the proposals were necessary to ensure the delivery of services.
- The Committee commended Recommendation 3, to align the budget proposals with climate action commitments in Borough Plan 2023-27, as the Recommendation would introduce mainstream climate action commitments which, whilst supporting with the Council's efforts in tackling the impacts of climate change, would also present additional savings opportunities. However, members noted that climate commitments related to the HRA would likely be unattainable due to the increased financial pressures on this area of the Council.

At this stage in proceedings, the Committee agreed to apply the guillotine procedure under Standing Order 62(c) in order to extend the meeting for a period of 15 minutes to enable the remaining business on the agenda to be considered.

- In providing further clarity regarding Recommendation 4, to explore a shared outcomes framework with the voluntary and community sector, it was explained that many voluntary and community sector organisations were concerned that the Council were signposting residents and service users to the third sector, who were already experiencing financial challenges, without consulting the sector beforehand. Thus, it was reiterated that engagement with the voluntary and community sector needed to be collaborative, frequent and iterative, occurring prior to the proposals being published. However, it was also acknowledged that further collaboration with partners and regional

bodies such as the Greater London Authority would also be beneficial to securing additional funding.

- Regarding Recommendation 5, to establish a strategic approach to income generation, members emphasised the importance of implementing an income generation strategy that set out the Council's strategic approach to improving the organisation's income, rather than relying on piece-meal proposals. In particular, the Task Group identified three areas in which the Council could focus on as a starting point to improve income generation: increasing HMO licensing compliance, increasing empty property council tax compliance and reducing business rates evasion.
- In discussing Recommendation 6, renting out Civic Centre meetings rooms to generate additional commercial revenue, the Committee noted that this option would be explored. However, members expressed concerns regarding the suitability of external venues in hosting Council meetings, given the requirements for strong internet connections and AV facilities. Moreover, the Committee pointed to the rationale behind the creation of the Civic Centre, which was to establish a central hub for the Council. Nevertheless, the Committee was advised that, whilst the Civic Centre did bring staff and councillors together, holding meetings in community venues could better connect the organisation to the communities it served.
- In response to a query regarding the possibility of lobbying for changes to the geographical restrictions tied to the Local Housing Allowance (LHA), members were informed that a recommendation was made by the 2023/24 Budget Scrutiny Task Group to lobby for amendments to the limit and structure of the LHA and therefore it was felt unnecessary to repeat the recommendation. Nevertheless, the Committee was reassured that further updates would be sought from Cabinet regarding the progress of previous recommendations.
- Concerning Recommendation 10, Wembley Stadium 'Community Impact' Ticket Levy, members noted that the Wembley National Stadium Trust collected 1% of net revenue which was distributed to relevant parties.
- To provide further context for Recommendation 11, delegation of budgets and decision making to Brent Integrated Care Partnership (ICP), it was detailed that due to decision making being made at the Northwest London regional level, it was felt that it was harder to ensure that programmes were suitably responding to local need and to secure funding for Brent. Therefore, it was perceived that if budgets were set at a local level, authorities would base decisions on clinical need and would co-deliver services where suitable. However, although conversations were occurring regarding the future of health funding, members heard that every borough had need and thus competition remained despite being in a Northwest coalition.

As no further issues were raised the Chair then drew the item to a close and the Committee **RESOLVED** to approve the findings and recommendations made by the Budget Scrutiny Task Group ahead of them being submitted to Cabinet and Full Council as part of the budget setting process.

9. **Resources & Public Realm Scrutiny Committee Work Programme 23/24**

The Committee noted that the 'Draft Property Strategy/Asset Review Findings' item had been moved from the 24 January 2024 meeting to instead be considered at the 27 February 2024 meeting. Furthermore, the 'Regeneration in Brent' item was now scheduled to be considered at the 23 April 2024 meeting rather than the 27 February 2024 meeting.

10. **Any Other Urgent Business**

None.

Date of the next meeting: Tuesday 27 February 2024

The meeting closed at 9.13pm

COUNCILLOR RITA CONNEELY
Chair