

SUMMONS ITEM 9(c)

LONDON BOROUGH OF BRENT

FULL COUNCIL – 23rd January 2006

REPORT FROM THE CHAIR OF SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

I would like to take this opportunity to wish you all a very happy New Year. I last provided a detailed report to Full Council in November about the range of scrutiny activities that had taken place and were underway at that time. As we go into 2006 the next cycle of scrutiny sub-committee meetings are underway with a meeting of the Quality of Life Scrutiny Panel due to take place on 24th January 2006 and a meeting of the Adult Social Care Scrutiny Panel which will take place on 26th January 2006. I would however like to take this opportunity to update you about two significant Scrutiny related events that took place in the run up to Christmas and the New Year.

Budget Scrutiny Event

Firstly, I am pleased to be able to report back on the first ever London-wide Budget Scrutiny event which took place on 1st December 2005 at the College of North West London (Wembley Park). As previously advised, this event was hosted by Brent in conjunction with the Association for London Government (ALG) and the London Scrutiny Network, which provides a forum for officers and members involved in Scrutiny across London to consider the development of this function. Brent is routinely represented at meetings of the Network by officers from Brent and also, when possible, by myself and Councillor Thompson. The Budget Scrutiny event was one of a number of projects being funded by the ALG's Improved Scrutiny Bid to the ODPM and was organised to provide a focus on the challenges involved in budget scrutiny and to identify areas of best practice. It is important to note that we were proactive about taking the lead on hosting and organising this event and that a great deal of time and effort was invested in drafting an interesting and workable proposal, which was subsequently well received.

A broad scope of political parties was represented at the event, thus highlighting the cross-party nature of Scrutiny. Officers and members from local authorities across London were present and even officers from as far away as Torbay and North Lincolnshire attended. This highlights a very real interest at a local government level about the subject. This event provided a very positive opportunity for elected representatives and officers to come together and share practical experiences and discuss different approaches towards achieving effective budget scrutiny.

The key speaker for the event was Dick Sorabji (Local Government information Unit) who has extensive knowledge of local government finance and budget Scrutiny. Officers from Hounslow and Brent also facilitated and

contributed to the debate by drawing out key themes for discussion. Councillors from the London boroughs of Harrow, Hammersmith and Fulham, Southwark and Croydon each made a series of brief presentations on a variety of budget scrutiny related themes such as the political challenges of budget scrutiny, development of the budget scrutiny process and the role of community engagement. The event was primarily about information and best practice sharing rather than defining what makes “good budget scrutiny” so an open floor debate towards the end of the session enabled all those present to comment on all the issues that had been raised and share their own personal experiences. In terms of wider information sharing, material from authorities across London was displayed at the venue and we made use of the opportunity to promote the Councils’ activities. At the end of the session attendees were invited to continue the debate over a buffet lunch which provided an interesting yet informal conclusion to the event.

With the forthcoming elections in May 2006 in mind the event presented members and officers with the chance to consider a key scrutiny issue and to comment on ways to enhance processes and practices following the Elections. Consequently, the outcome of the event is likely to be of interest to any new councillors in May 2006 who will benefit from the experiences of councillors and officers, particularly those that have been involved in scrutiny since the new decision making structures were introduced in 2002. As a result of the debate and discussion that took place a “toolkit” is being developed by officers in Democratic Services in conjunction with the co-chairs of the London Scrutiny Network to provide an overview of the event and a synopsis of the discussion that took place. Incorporated in this work will be a summary of the issues arising from the debate and a guide that identifies areas of best practice and issues that could be considered in terms of further developing budget scrutiny processes and practice.

All in all it was a very informative event and feedback from the attendees and key speakers has been very positive with particular comments made about the significance of the themes raised by the key speakers and the benefits of sharing best practice in this approach. Other comments stressed the need for further debate and therefore a toolkit as outlined above is likely to be well received by officers and members across London. As Chair of scrutiny I am very pleased that Brent took a proactive lead in organising and co-hosting such a well received event with the ALG / London Scrutiny Network.

Children and Families Scrutiny Panel: - Call-In and referral

As you know the Executive’s decision regarding the Expression of Interest in a 2nd City Academy was called-in to Scrutiny following the meeting of the Executive in November 2005. The matter was first discussed at the meeting of the Children and Families Scrutiny Panel in November. Thereafter the Executive’s decision was called-in and since it related to an education matter a special meeting of the Panel had to take place to allow for consideration of the reasons specified for the call-in. As I’m sure many of you are aware, a full debate took place with deputations received by the Panel from local residents and the leader of the Conservative Group. A range of concerns were

expressed regarding this matter, as highlighted in the minutes of the meeting. The view of Scrutiny was that whilst the development of a 2nd City Academy was accepted, the Executive should reconsider the site options and proposed catchment area. The Executive subsequently disregarded the view of Scrutiny and the matter has now been referred to Full Council for further discussion.

**Councillor Suresh Kansagra,
Chair, Scrutiny Committee**