

## SUMMONS ITEM 9(b)

### LONDON BOROUGH OF BRENT

### FULL COUNCIL – 24<sup>th</sup> APRIL 2005

#### REPORT FROM THE CHAIR OF OVERVIEW COMMITTEE

My first task is to report the recent work of the Committee and its Health Overview Panel. In addition, and as this is the last Full Council meeting before the local elections in May, I shall reflect on the contribution that the Committee has made over a longer period to the development of Council policy.

My involvement with the ALG's London Scrutiny Network has given me a basis for comparison with other Local Authorities, and I would argue that we in Brent have a particularly strong record of successful policy development. In some other authorities, especially where a single committee covers the functions of both overview and scrutiny, the scrutiny function tends to dominate. In Brent, we seem to have achieved a better balance; and we can point to many examples where the work of Overview has led to changes on the ground which have improved the life of the people we serve.

#### OVERVIEW COMMITTEE

Task groups have formed the core work of the Overview Committee and their conclusions and recommendations have continued to positively impact on local communities. I believe that the quantity, quality and wide range of our work programme over the past four years is itself testament to the Committee's success. In recent months, the Committee has received the final reports from the following task groups:

- Increasing Childcare Places
- Housing Densities and Urban Impacts
- Community Access to Schools
- Access to Financial Services

At the meeting on 7<sup>th</sup> February 2006, the Committee received an update on the implementation of the recommendations for **Increasing Childcare Places** and heard that work in this area had been substantially taken forward. Children's Centres are the key driver for this programme, and the Committee was informed that the Council is currently on target to meet Sure Start targets regarding the provision of these centres. This programme will also be linked to the Extended Schools Strategy.

The task group report on **Housing Densities and Urban Impacts** has now been approved by the full Committee, subject to a small but important addition to include reference to "*access to well-designed and safe play areas*". The report, thus amended, has been referred to the Executive for consideration. The task group

found that housing density is not in itself problematic but there are associated issues that need to be addressed, including crucially the importance of design and consultation. Chris Walker (Director of Planning) assured the Committee that the report's recommendations would be taken into account in maintaining the Local Development Framework and would also inform the review of SPG 17 (the Council's design guidance).

At the meeting on 23<sup>rd</sup> March, the Committee received a report outlining the work, findings and recommendations of the **Community Access to Schools** task group. One of the key aims of this group has been to influence the emerging Extended Schools Strategy. The task group were concerned that one of the cluster groups used for the pilot of this project was based on schools with a religious affiliation. They felt that this would work counter to embracing diversity within the borough. Consequently, the cluster arrangements have been rearranged, so as to be based on Primary Care Trust (PCT) areas. Overall, this report was well received by the Committee; and was agreed, subject to minor amendment.

Despite some initial concerns about lack of progress in implementing the recommendations of the task group into **Access to Financial Services**, at the meeting on 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2006, the Committee received assurances from the Director of Housing and Community Care that implementation was now in hand. He also said that further progress will be made by integrating recommendations into the Brent Income Maximisation Strategy 2006-08, currently being drafted. An 'Access to Financial Services Week' will be held in June 2006. There are also plans for a Credit Union Workshop day to be organised in conjunction with the Association of British Credit Unions (ABCUL), to which community groups interested in establishing Credit Unions will be invited.

Since commissioning a consultation on **the Council's approach to corporate debt and income collection** at the meeting on 27<sup>th</sup> October 2005, the Committee has continued to monitor progress. Responses to a consultation questionnaire have been used to inform the review of the Council's debt recovery strategy. One of the key issues discussed was the impact of debt on vulnerable groups; and the importance of differentiating between individuals struggling with debt and wilful non-payers. The Director of Finance and Corporate Resources told the Committee that, as the Council's draft Corporate Debt Strategy was under review, he was looking at how the work being carried out by the Committee could be taken on board.

Also, at the meeting on 7<sup>th</sup> February, the Committee received a report outlining the key issues and trends concerning **Area and User Consultative Forums** which emerged during the meetings cycle of 2005-06, and on 23<sup>rd</sup> March **the Overview Annual Report** was adopted.

## **HEALTH OVERVIEW PANEL**

The Health Overview Panel has a fine record of achievement too, particularly in terms of establishing co-operative working with and between the numerous public and voluntary agencies in the health field. Over the past four years, the Panel has developed effective working relationships with other health agencies, and met on five occasions during the municipal year 2005/06.

Panel members have undertaken regular performance monitoring and received quarterly updates from the Brent tPCT, the North West London Hospitals Trust and the Central and North West London Mental Health Trust. Recently, they contributed to the Healthcare Commission's "Annual Health Check" process by providing formal responses to the declarations of each trust. Furthermore, the Health Overview Panel has led two seminars on the "Choosing Health – Brent" strategy, helping to raise awareness of the public health agenda amongst Council departments and the wider public.

The Panel has made a valuable contribution to a Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee, established between Harrow, Brent and Ealing Council to monitor the effectiveness of consultation on the reconfiguration of Northwick Park Hospital. Further developments in the consultation process are expected in the new municipal year 2006/07 and, at the request of the Panel, the Lead Member for Adults and Social Care has been invited to respond formally to the North West London Strategic Health Authority regarding future arrangements.

The Healthcare Commission placed Northwick Park Hospital Maternity Unit in special measures in April 2005, following concerns about the maternal death rate. Since then, the Health Overview has monitored improvements and future plans for the unit and has invited representatives from the trust to meetings to report progress. At the last meeting on 9<sup>th</sup> March 2006, the Panel received assurances from the Director of Operations of the NWL NHS Hospitals Trust that an improved clinical governance structure is now in place. He also reported that the planned refurbishment of the unit is nearing completion and there has been significant new recruitment over the past months.

The Panel has also monitored the implementation of the tuberculosis action plan, the recommendations made by the Sexual Health Task group, and the progress of the Brent Influenza Pandemic Contingency Plan. Finally, a Health Scrutiny Advisor has been recruited through the Centre for Public Scrutiny/Improvement and Development Agency to facilitate seminar work and to help with future work programming, within a wider review of the Council's Overview and Scrutiny structure. This is being conducted in the context of the forthcoming changes of the Primary Care Trust and Strategic Health Authority boundaries, and the new Health and Social Care White Paper. It has also helped to define the Council's role as a partner in supporting the public health agenda and the Health Overview Panel's role as a monitoring body.

Councillor N Thompson.  
Chair, Overview Committee.