

MINUTES OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

10 February 2009 at 7.30 pm

PRESENT: Councillor Jones (Chair), Councillor Castle (Vice Chair), and Councillors Clues, R Moher, HB Patel and Thomas.

ALSO PRESENT: Councillor Lorber (Leader of the Council), and Councillors Butt and Crane.

1. **Declarations of Personal and Prejudicial Interests**

None declared.

2. **Minutes of Previous Meetings**

RESOLVED:

that the minutes of the meeting held on 10th December 2008 be approved as an accurate record.

3. **Matters Arising**

None..

4. **Appointments to Sub-Committees**

None

5. **Member's IT**

The Committee considered the report which outlined recent issues and problems with Member's IT, changes to Connecta and future plans.

Tony Ellis (Head of IT) advised the Committee of upgrades to be made to the Council's Information Technology system including replacing the Connecta service at the end of March 2009. He informed that the existing servers were being replaced with a new data centre at Brent House which was already functional and a new one at the Town Hall which would be up and running by the end of March. He also elaborated on the Council's plans to migrate services from Lotus Notes to Microsoft Outlook beginning in September 2009, which he described as being more user friendly. He cautioned that a more specific date to that outlined could not be provided as the move from Lotus to Outlook was being tested. He also requested understanding from Members, stating that migrating from the old environment to the new would be a challenging period, and current priority was to roll out a new telephony system. Encouragement was given to the Committee that the IT Unit was in the process of vastly improving IT services within the Council, but patience was also requested.

Tony Ellis admitted that some of the computer hardware in use in the Council was in need of replacement, and that staff and councilors needed to be less hardware dependent. In pointing out that there would be better compatibility with Mac, he called for continued investment in IT to ensure IT services were compatible with the efficiency

objectives to which the Council was striving. He also reminded the Committee that the IT unit was now part of the new Business Transformation Department. He had already raised with the new Director the need for a review of IT provision for Members.

Members raised the problem they experienced of not receiving feedback on progress in addressing issues or problems raised by them. A number of examples of this were referred to.

Tony Ellis responded to the specific issues raised and acknowledged that the level of communication could be improved.

In raising issues, Members pointed out that more and more of their constituents expected to be able to communicate through electronic means and in a more efficient manner.

The suggestion was put forward by the Committee that visits to other Councils should be explored to review their IT service to councillors so as to inform Brent Council's own IT service provision. The hope was expressed that the review would also allow Members the space to communicate their concerns and views. The Chair requested that a report on the review be presented to Committee.

The Chair suggested that an early evening surgery might be offered to Councillors by the IT team so as to address some of their concerns. Tony Ellis agreed to consider this request against the background of available resources within his unit.

The Chair thanked Tony Ellis for attending the committee.

RESOLVED:-

- (i) that the report to the Committee by the Head of IT be noted.
- (ii) that the outcome of the Member IT review be presented to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

6. **Update from the Leader of the Council on the Administration's Priorities**

The Chair welcomed Councillor Lorber to the meeting and reminded him of the six corporate priorities he had referred to when he last attended the Committee in July 2008.

Councillor Lorber confirmed that his priorities remained the same since his last appearance before the Committee on 22nd July 2008.

He informed Members that the crime strategy was about making local people feel safe, and progress was being made in this regard with crime being down in Brent by 21%. He added that there was an ongoing working relationship with the Police and other partner bodies. He further informed Members that the Council had recently purchased the services of an additional 16 Police Community Support Officers, in addition to which a five year extension deal for the programme was to be implemented. He

advised that CCTV in the Borough was to be expanded with Willesden the next area to be targeted, but that procurement procedures had slowed progress. In commenting on the preventative side of the crime strategy, Councillor Lorber stated that the Executive had recommended in next year's budget that £650,000 be directed for positive activities for young people.

Regeneration was another priority area and Councillor Lorber stated that it was his administration's intention to pursue regeneration activities, and as such the most deprived neighbourhoods would be areas of focus. The Executive he added was also keen on seeing regeneration schemes in Wembley and South Kilburn help deliver people out of the poverty trap. In commenting on the North Circular Road regeneration he informed Members that the Council was part way through the consultation round, the final report for which was expected in April 2009.

The Working Neighbourhood Fund he outlined was now a matter of concern for the Executive owing to a £4 Million reduction in Government support. The Executive would be further considering the implications of this.

Regarding engaging young people, Councillor Lorber stressed that his administration was keen to listen to the views of young people, and consequently the Youth Parliament had been successful in conveying their views. Active youth engagement he added had revealed that crime was among the things for which the youth had a concern. Success associated with young people identified by Councillor Lorber were excellent GCSE results for students from the Borough, and the expansion of the extended school programme to provide more out of school activity.

In addressing environmental issues as a part of his administration's priorities, Councillor Lorber outlined that a 40% recycling target had been set for Brent, which he admitted was a big challenge. He added that, although compulsory recycling recently introduced in the Borough had been a success, more creative measures were needed to enable the achievement of the recycling target. In providing more detail, he informed that the current rate of recycling in Brent was 30% with particular success regarding plastic bottles, and extra money was being put into the Council's recycling service. A reduction in CO2 emissions in the Borough was also identified as a target for the Council to take a lead and £155,000 was being included in next year's budget for work in this area. Among the initiatives identified by Councillor Lorber in keeping with this target, was a green travel plan which had been produced and the Civic Centre project which he intended to be the most environmentally friendly building possible.

Councillor Lorber stated that the Business Transformation Department was now operational, and that Graham Ellis was the new Director. The focus of the Department he stressed would be on bringing about efficiency in all Council operations, and that more than 70 efficiency projects were underway. Local service and value for money he added were a priority, especially in light of the reduction of resources to the Council. All members of staff he outlined would be expected to strive for efficiency in their activities, as a related key objective was for improvements in services to local people.

Having concluded his presentation, the Chair then invited questions from the Committee of Councillor Lorber in respect of the issues outlined in the presentation.

The Committee asked how the 40% recycling target would be achieved, without drastically improving the rate of recycling plastic. In response, Councillor Lorber informed Members that Central Government had reneged on a promise to return revenue gained from landfill tax to Councils for green projects. He added that there needed to be a nationwide increase in capacity for recycling and further incentive to local authorities to invest locally. The Council was already at the point where it was recycling as much as it could within the current arrangements.

The Committee asked if the Executive had protested to the Government about the cut in the Working Neighbourhood Fund. Councillor Lorber stated that the Government had imposed a cap on the Fund, and that Brent was one of 60 Councils that had initially been identified to benefit but that a change of approach had then penalized Brent. Phil Newby (Director, Policy and Regeneration) informed the Committee that the methodology used by the Government in calculating the Fund revolved around taking a snapshot in time of Brent's working population. The Government had then decided it had to review the position and this was at a time when there was a higher level in the working population and meant that the Council missed out. A protest by the Council had had no effect on the Government's thinking, and consideration now needed to be given to what could be done about the situation.

The Committee stated that the consultation on the North Circular Road regeneration in Church End had stirred concern among residents that homes would be bought up and demolished. Members asked how these misconceptions could be addressed. Concern was also expressed that the consultation had been issued without proper discussion of the issues with Members. Councillor Lorber responded by stating that the Executive had data that showed the North Circular Road was a most unhealthy place for people to live. The long term view was therefore that action needed to be taken around the route of the North Circular Road. Consultation he stressed was to make people aware and give people an opportunity to express their views.

Phil Newby stated that stage 1 of the programme had allowed for consultation with leafleting and discussion at local area consultative forums. There were no plans, he stressed, to knock down anyone's home, although the Council was looking at where there might be options to provide additional housing and leisure facilities. He expressed the view that in its current state the North Circular Road was unattractive for encouraging investment. He added that prior to the consultation the issue had been the subject of a report to the Executive which had been called in for further consideration by the Forward Plan Select Committee.

The Committee asked whether, with the economic downturn and consequent increased unemployment, and with Harlesden and Kilburn having in the past particularly suffered in such times, what plans the Executive had to deal with any upsurge in crime stemming from the current situation. Councillor Lorber informed that statistics did not as yet reveal any increase in crime for Brent. He added however that in such an event it would be a police matter, although the Executive could lobby for additional resources for the police in Brent if necessary. Mark Toseland, Borough Commander, Metropolitan Police, it was pointed out had been doing a good job in leading intelligence led policing in Brent.

The Committee referenced a recent report into the case load of social workers at Haringey Council, adding that it had revealed social workers to have too many cases. As a consequence Haringey Council was requesting the loan of a social worker from each Borough. Against this background, Councillor Lorber was asked whether he was satisfied with the arrangements in place for looking after children in Brent.

The Committee further raised the issue of professional social workers employed by Brent, expressing concern that too many social workers were employed on short term contracts, as against recruiting full time experienced social workers. It then enquired as to how this situation would be addressed.

In addressing the issues raised, Councillor Lorber expressed the view that the recent Haringey Baby P case had been poorly handled by the government. The work area he stressed was highly pressurized and that social work was a difficult field within which to recruit. He added that his administration had noted the results of the recent review of social worker's case load and it was for this reason why it had increased its budgetary allocation to social care by £1Million. The Executive he stressed would do all it could to ensure adequate social care provision by the Council. He expressed agreement with there being too many temporary staff, but advised that the Council was doing all it could in recruiting more permanent staff. In concluding his response, Councillor Lorber stated that what was also needed was a professional non-blame service culture.

In following up this latter point, the Chair asked Councillor Lorber how he saw the improvement programme motivating staff.

Councillor Lorber stated that Mr Graham Ellis, the new Business Transformation Director, was keen to engage staff in the process, and was listening to the views of staff. He also stated that a key objective was to drive improvement in services which would continue to make Brent Council an exciting place for employment. Phil Newby added that other Directors were also spearheading productivity improvements and a dedicated team had been formed to contribute to the effort.

Having concluded his presentation and answered questions, Councillor Lorber left the meeting having been thanked by the Chair for his attendance and participation.

RESOLVED:-

that the position on the Administration pursuing its priorities as outlined to the Committee by the Leader be noted and the Leader be invited to report back to the Committee in six months' time on:

- the impact of the recession on local people and how the Council is responding to this
- progress on delivering the improvement programme
- progress on providing new social housing and
- efforts made to recruit more permanent social care staff.

7. **Overview and Scrutiny Task Group Updates**

Councillor HB Patel updated the Committee by stating that a joint task group had been established in 2008 to look at the issue of climate change in Brent and a full report would be presented to Committee in May 2009. He pointed out that 80% of carbon emissions in the Borough was through the operations of the Council, although actions such as installing new boilers and computers automatically switching off at 7pm had helped in reducing such emissions. He stressed that school buildings were the main problem as many of them were old, and £220 Million would be needed to improve them.

Councillor Patel also reported on the work of the task group looking at increasing participation in recycling in flats and acknowledged that it was difficult to get people to participate in recycling, when they were faced with having to travel up and down blocks of flats to dispose of their rubbish.

Jacqueline Casson (Senior Policy Officer, Policy and Regeneration) presented a brief update advising that the first evidence session for the task group on services for women exiting prostitution was planned for 16th February 2009.

The Chair thanked the presenters for the information provided and informed Councillor Patel that the Committee looked forward to receiving the final report on climate change in Brent.

RESOLVED:-

that the update on the Committee's current task groups be noted.

8. **Carers meeting attended by members of the Committee and Members visit to Strathcona day care centre.**

The Chair reported back from the visit by members to the Strathcona Day Centre. Carers she outlined welcomed the opportunity the visit presented to express their views and ask questions. The issues raised had been fed back to the service area and responses had been received. It had been a positive experience to meet both the clients and the carers and Members had been impressed by the amount of effort put in by the staff involved. The Chair added that the visit had included ASPPECT (Autism Services Promoting Partnership, Empowerment, Creativity and Teamwork). The Chair stated that Carers had been reassured by the visit and the interest shown. Following the visit, she had been pleased to hear that accommodation for the Albert Road Day Centre and ASSPECT was due to be re-built.

The Chair pointed out to the committee that the results of the 2nd consultation on day centres for people with disabilities would be presented at the next meeting of the Committee.

9. **Date of Next Meeting**

It was noted that the next meeting was scheduled to take place on 24th March 2009 at 7:30pm

11. **Any Other Urgent Business**

None.

The meeting ended at 9:16pm

L. JONES

Chair