

MINUTES OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

27 May 2009 at 7.30 pm

PRESENT: Councillor Jones (Chair), Councillor Castle (Vice Chair – part), and Councillors Bessong (for Clues) and Mistry.

Apologies for absence were given on behalf of Councillors Clues, H B Patel and Thomas.

1. Declarations of Personal and Prejudicial Interests

None declared.

2. Minutes of Previous Meetings

RESOLVED:

that the minutes of the meeting held on 24 March 2009 be approved as an accurate record.

3. Matters Arising

None.

4. Scope of Voluntary and Community Sector Strategy 2009/14

Linda Martin (Head of Service Development and Commissioning) introduced the report and answered questions from members on the scope of the Council's Voluntary and Community Sector Strategy, to be developed and implemented over the coming five years. Linda Martin reported that the Council's relationship with the voluntary and community sector had improved considerably in recent years. The Council had engaged the sector on various levels, and the Chief Executive chaired regular liaison meetings between the Council and the sector. The Council's procurement strategy was being rewritten by the Corporate Procurement Unit, and one of the reasons for doing this was to better enable small organisations, including the voluntary and community sector, to bid when a contract was tendered.

The proposed Voluntary and Community Strategy was a whole Council strategy, with an emphasis on building positive relationships. Currently around £14m was being spent on services provided under contract by voluntary and community organisations, and the Council would not be able to deliver services without them. The sector was of good quality, and made good quality bids for Council grant funding. For example, in the recent bidding round for the Main Programme Grant, more than 60 organisations had bid, and all except two were able to go to full evaluation. However, the Council was only able to fund around one-third of the organisations which had bid, but was keen to support the organisations in ways other than financial.

Linda Martin informed the Committee that the scope of the strategy had come from the voluntary and community sector, and time had been invested in consultation. The scope had been discussed at the Council's Corporate Management Team and by Partners for Brent. Asked why Brent had scored low in a national survey of third sector organisations carried out in 2008, Linda Martin reported that the main issue had been the extent to which the organisations which responded felt able to influence decisions. The Council was aiming to make the engagement process clearer, and it was hoped that the process of making nominations to partnership boards would help. Linda Martin added that she did not believe that the organisations with which the Council engaged felt that they lacked influence, rather the ones with which the Council was not so involved. However, a successful conference had been held in February 2009 to explore ways of working together and engaging with more of the sector. There was also a proposal to top-slice the grant to voluntary and community organisations, although this would need to be approved by the Council's Executive, with a view to being able to make 'micro' grants to small organisations. Members welcomed this.

Asked about the usefulness of grant-tracking software, in particular to avoid any possibility of double funding, Linda Martin reported that the software was a very helpful tool, and that the Council was in the process of collecting and co-ordinating information. However, it was a big job to gather all the relevant information. The Council did encourage small organisations to merge in situations where the organisations shared functions. While such proposals were sometimes welcomed, in many cases organisations wanted to guard their independence, taking the view that their strength was in their diversity. Answering a question about safeguards against possible double funding, Linda Martin informed the Committee that this was not a problem, as most of the funds came from one source. Cathy Tyson (Assistant Director, Policy) added in relation to neighbourhood working spend that, while it might be appropriate to use a voluntary group for agreed tasks, this was not the case in general. If a voluntary or community organisation were to be used, records would be kept on the Council's finance system, and these were analysed every year. Councillors expressed an interest in the work of the grant-tracking software and requested that information on this be brought to a future meeting.

In answer to a question on the length of the consultation period – six months, Linda Martin reported that, while the government recommended 12 weeks, she felt that this was a minimum in relation to the third sector, as the Council was also aiming to make the consultation an opportunity for dialogue, discussion and engagement, and that more haste would result in less speed in this instance. Councillors were interested in feedback at a future meeting on the developing relationship between the Council and the third sector. Linda Martin suggested that a number of representatives of the sector could also be invited to attend the Committee for this.

RESOLVED:

- (i) that the report be noted;

- (ii) that a report be brought to the Committee on the developing relationship between the Council and the third sector, with sector representatives invited;
- (iii) that an analysis of the effectiveness of the Council's grant-tracking software be brought to a future meeting;
- (iv) that the issue of procurement in relation to the third sector be considered in the context of overview and scrutiny work on procurement across the Council.

5. **Brent Crime Prevention Strategy Group – Work Programme, Priorities and Responding to the Police and Justice Act 2006**

Genny Renard (Interim Head, Community Safety Team) introduced the report and answered questions from members on the work of the Crime Prevention Strategy Group, Brent's Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership. She informed members that crime prevention partnerships were being introduced in order to bring together the work of the various agencies involved, in line with the Police and Justice Act 2006, which made working together obligatory. Brent's partnership, which was chaired by Brent Council's Chief Executive, was smaller than average, with a budget of around £3m. The Borough Commander was Vice Chair of the partnership, the work of which was a good example of the "one Council" approach, with the involvement of areas as diverse as children and families, environment, planning and licensing.

The partnership was looking to develop a project to support people who had been in prison for under a year, as they did not qualify for support from the probation service. The voluntary and community sector was also involved, with an organisation called 'Not Another Drop' applying to become a charity by the end of the year. The partnership had also worked with the Crown Prosecution Service to ensure that domestic violence cases were heard on a particular day of the week before specially trained magistrates. Genny Renard reported that Brent had a low failure rate of domestic violence cases as a result of lack of evidence or failure to prepare evidence properly. She also gave details of performance against targets in 2008/09. For example, the borough had a low rate of recorded hate crime, which was a good record, but a less good record in relation to the prosecution of burglaries, although this had been a stretch target. Genny Renard distributed to members a breakdown of offences by ward, and she agreed to provide this information quarterly to full Council.

Asked whether the long action plan was manageable, Genny Renard reported that the length of the plan was a consequence of its being part of the "one Council" approach of strategy and delivery. However, it was possible that it might be streamlined at a later stage. Cathy Tyson (Assistant Director, Policy) added that the partnership was operating under the Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA) framework, providing evidence of and setting priorities, and managing complex partnership arrangements. The action plan was therefore necessarily complex and detailed.

Answering questions from members, Genny Renard pointed out that while, for example, Brent had less knife crime than Sutton and less gun crime than Croydon, Brent residents had less confidence in the police and a greater fear of crime than residents in those boroughs. Reducing the fear of crime was important as a focus. An example of work aimed at reducing crime and the fear of crime was a project involving Transport for London (TfL) in safety at school gates. Sanctions ranged from an interview with a police officer to the removal of a young person's Oyster card, but it had not yet been necessary to deprive anyone of their Oyster card.

Andrew Davies (Policy and Performance Officer) outlined the Committee's role in relation to scrutinising the work of the crime and disorder reduction partnership. He pointed to existing task groups, on help for people exiting prostitution, for example, and the Committee's work on the impact of the recession. There was also the possibility of work to look at gangs, and the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee was considering the issue of safety at school gates, the results of which would be reported to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. These were all examples of scrutiny of the work of the partnership. Cathy Tyson added that the Committee was not the only group with an overview of the strategy. For example, the Local Strategic Partnership Board received verbal updates from the Borough Commander, as well as quarterly reports on Local Area Agreement targets. The Performance and Finance Select Committee also received regular monitoring information on crime and disorder.

After discussion, members agreed, in addition to continuing work on existing task groups, to receive reports on the following aspects of the work of the partnership:

- the community payback operation, which provides the opportunity for local people to have a say on how people who have committed crimes should make amends
- instances of stop and search carried out under Section 60 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994
- the monitoring and resettlement of offenders.

Members also welcomed a proposal to receive training on this new aspect of their work.

RESOLVED:

- (i) that the report be noted;
- (ii) that the Committee carry out its role of monitoring the work of the crime and disorder reduction partnership by
 - (a) continuing its work and existing task groups

- (b) receiving reports within six months on community payback, stop and search carried out under Section 60 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994, and the Probation Service's monitoring of offenders.

6. **Town Centre Regeneration Task Group Report – Update on Implementation of Recommendations**

The Chair proposed that written answers be requested on the following aspects of the recommendations of the Town Centre Regeneration Task Group Report:

- the likely timescale for work on a protocol to agree priorities and improve the response to environmental issues raised by town centre managers
- the issue of whether the current town centre strategy was still relevant
- the progress of research into the possibility of introducing dual-use planning permission for flexible use of properties on the periphery of the town centre
- the extent of delivery of the commitment of Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs) to monitor the environment.

RESOLVED:

that the Committee receive written answers on the following aspects of the recommendations of the Town Centre Regeneration Task Group Report:

- the likely timescale for work on a protocol to agree priorities and improve the response to environmental issues raised by town centre managers
- the issue of whether the current town centre strategy was still relevant
- the progress of research into the possibility of introducing dual-use planning permission for flexible use of properties on the periphery of the town centre
- the extent of delivery of the commitment of Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs) to monitor the environment.

7. **Update on Ongoing Task Groups**

Andrew Davies (Policy and Performance Officer) provided members with a verbal update on the work of the Climate Change Task Group. He reported that the task group had visited the Energy Solutions and Welsh Harp Education Centre, both of which raised awareness about sustainability within the local community. The task group had been informed that the Council's carbon management strategy was not in line to meet its overall target of a 20% reduction in carbon emissions by 2011. While many exemplary projects to reduce carbon emissions were in place, in some areas, such as school buildings carbon emissions had increased. The Council had asked the Carbon Trust to look at its carbon management strategy and suggest ways to bring it

back on track. The group was therefore awaiting the findings and recommendations of the Carbon Trust's review before finalising its work.

RESOLVED:

that the verbal update be noted.

8. **Overview and Scrutiny Committee Work Programme**

Andrew Davies (Policy and Performance Officer) briefed members on the Committee's work programme and encouraged them to suggest further ideas for future work by the Committee. Two scopes for task groups – one on access to health services for people with learning disabilities and one on the role of councilors in reinvigorating democracy in Brent – had also been included in the report for consideration.

RESOLVED:

- (i) that the report be noted;
- (ii) that the task group on access to health services for people with learning disabilities be added to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee work programme.

9. **Date of Next Meeting**

It was noted that the next meeting was scheduled to take place on Thursday 9 July 2009.

10. **Any Other Urgent Business**

None.

The meeting ended at 9.10 pm.

L JONES
Chair