



MINUTES OF THE RESOURCES AND PUBLIC REALM SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
Tuesday 8 November 2016 at 7.00 pm

PRESENT:

Councillors Kelcher (Chair), Davidson (Vice-Chair), Aden, Ezeajughi, McLeish, M Patel and Tatler

Also Present: Councillors Duffy, McLennan and Miller

Apologies were received from: Councillors S Choudhary

1. Declarations of Interests

There were no declarations of interest received from Members.

2. Deputations

There were no deputations.

3. Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 6 September 2016, were approved as an accurate record and signed by the Chair.

4. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

5. Income Generation

Althea Loderick (the Council's Strategic Director for Resources) introduced the report which provided the Committee with an update on the delivery of the Council's Civic Enterprise Strategy. The strategy was initially approved by Cabinet in June 2016 and formed part of the Council's 2016/2017 budget strategy. The Committee heard about the role of Civic Enterprise in delivering better outcomes for residents in Brent and maximising income generation for the Council in the face of diminished funding from central government. It was noted that the Council had a specific budget target of £5.7million in additional income to achieve by the 2018/2019. Althea Loderick outlined that the Council needed to work more innovatively to achieve this aim and that cultural change across the Council was required across five civic enterprise work streams. She stated that a high degree of staff engagement and market research had taken place to inform the following six key income generating projects being taken forward:

- (i) Energy;
- (ii) Trading with Schools;
- (iii) Consultancy Services;
- (iv) Weddings;
- (v) Make the best use of assets; and
- (vi) Investment in Businesses.

As an example, Althea Loderick spoke in greater detail about the energy development project and how it was aimed to generate income but also aligned with wider objectives such as reducing carbon emissions across the Borough and thereby providing the local community with better value energy services. She also drew attention to weddings being of increased significance because of the substantial opportunity for generating income, and possible opportunities for the Council to hold weddings externally at different venues across the Borough. The Committee also heard an overview of the achievements of income generating activity such as: a 10 year contract with Argiva to place wireless cells on lampposts; a tendering exercise now taking place to buy space on Council assets; the implementation of an in-house bailiff service; and income generating initiatives increasingly taking place on Wembley Park event days.

The Chair noted the need for culture change across the Council to make these aims achievable and asked how this would be measured. Althea Loderick stated that it was significant that the six key projects had been drawn from over 400 staff ideas for income generation. She stated it was very important that the Civic Enterprise Strategy was established using staff expertise from the bottom up, rather than from senior management having driven change from the top down. The Committee heard that this year's 'Your Voice' staff survey asked specific questions on how involved staff were in innovative and entrepreneurial projects and whether they felt their ideas were being listened to. Althea Loderick stated that one way of measuring cultural change would be to see the responses to this survey reflecting progress made year on year. However, she did emphasise to the Committee that achieving this change would take time and was an ongoing process. She said that she believed staff would respond positively to seeing the projects achieve their aims and the favourable outcomes to residents arising from these in future. Councillor McLennan (Deputy Leader) added that cultural change would also require significant political leadership to ensure that staff knew that the Council was heading in a much more entrepreneurial direction in order to mitigate against further central government funding cuts.

Questions arose surrounding the 'Investment in Businesses' project and whether there had been any detectable scepticism from central government or other local authorities on the concept of lending to small businesses. Althea Loderick stated that at this point there had not been, however conversations were ongoing with colleagues in the Finance Team to ensure that the Council maximised its return on any investment. The Chair also questioned whether this project would see the Council using 'Funding Circle' (a peer-to-peer lending platform often used by Local Authorities as a safe way of lending to small businesses). Althea Loderick confirmed that Brent was currently planning to use Funding Circle and hoped to use it to invest around £200,000 into small businesses across the Borough.

On specific issues relating to larger events at the Civic Centre, such as weddings, Members questioned whether ongoing issues surrounding both a lack of parking

and the inflexibility of catering arrangements were being addressed. Althea Loderick agreed that there was a need for the Council to look in greater detail at the parking options available for larger events. On catering, the Committee heard that the Council was currently looking at re-negotiating its existing catering contract to ensure that there was greater flexibility particularly in terms of providing for different religions which had more specific dietary needs. It was noted that the Council was had not waited until the end of the current contract, but was re-negotiating mid-way through in order to try and address this quickly.

Discussions moved to the 'Trading with Schools' project, where a Member asked for greater detail on how this was expected to generate income when school budgets were likely to be frozen in the coming years. Althea Loderick responded that the idea was to offer schools advice on human resources issues, legal assistance and strategic financial planning. She told the Committee that the work of other Councils in this area had highlighted the potential for success but that the Council would need to tailor its offer specifically to each individual school's needs. The Committee also heard that the initial plan would be to initially focus on offering services to independent schools in the Borough as secondary schools within academy chains and primary schools within multi-academy trusts were likely to have their own in-house services relating to these areas.

Members raised questions on the pricing structure of events taking place at the Civic Centre and also what the publicity strategy was for advertising this as a venue. Althea Loderick and Councillor McLennan agreed that the general view tended to be that, at present, the Council was not utilising the space and facilities at the Civic Centre to its maximum in terms of generating income. On pricing, the Committee heard that the Civic Centre was deemed as a premier venue and it was important not to undervalue event prices. However it was acknowledged that there was also a need for a degree of balance between also making it available to community and voluntary sector organisations' for social value events. Althea Loderick and Councillor McLennan both noted that the Council needed to decide what market it was ultimately aiming to be in, in terms of generating income from Civic Centre events. On publicity, Althea Loderick stated that the plan was to raise the profile of the different types of service that the Council could offer (including conferences and television adverts etc.) and this would generally come through a multitude of online channels. She also noted that the Council had also spoken to partners such as Quintain and the Football Association in terms of what the Council could offer in conjunction with some of its respective hospitality events.

RESOLVED that the content of the report be noted.

6. Update on the Community Access Strategy

Margaret Read (the Council's Director of Customer Services) introduced the report which provided the Committee with an update on the progress of the Community Access Strategy since it was agreed by Cabinet in October 2014. She stated that the strategy had been driven by the following four key aims:

- (i) Improving residents' experience;
- (ii) Redesigning access arrangements to meet differing needs of residents;

- (iii) Extending and improving services available on line to increase self-service; and
- (iv) Making access arrangements more efficient, eliminating duplication and better managing customer demand.

The Committee heard some of the key achievements in relation to these aims. One of the most successful aspects of the Community Access Strategy had been the digital 'My Account' service, which allowed residents to access a host of different Council services online. It was noted that 54,000 residents had created an account and that there were future plans to incorporate ten additional Council services onto the online platform by the end of 2017. Margaret Read also outlined that this had contributed to a significant reduction in calls received from 3 million to 1.8 million. It was also noted that published telephone numbers on the Council's website had been successfully reduced in order to allow residents to have a more direct route to the services that they were looking for. Progress had also been made in redesigning the Customer Services Centre with a more effective integrated triage system to again lead residents more efficiently to the correct service area. Overall, this had allowed the Council to make an annual saving of £1.5 million.

Margaret Read also discussed next steps in the strategy in addition to the ten services being incorporated into the 'My Account' system. This included reviewing and re-launching Brent's customer promise plus a new customer promise score card which would measure performance against published standards. The Committee heard that the Community Access Team had worked closely with the Human Resources Team to ensure that a resident focus was ingrained within the organisation going forward. This had involved talking to commercial brands such as John Lewis on their techniques for instilling a resident focus in new staff through recruitment, training and performance management. She also mentioned that customer satisfaction would be benchmarked across a number of indicators across all service channels and that a tool kit was being developed for managers on the best methods of incorporating resident feedback into future service planning.

Members noted the strategy's aim to ensure more residents were self-sufficient in using online services, however a point was raised that there remained a lot of residents who weren't confident using online services for all elements of customer experience and would still rely on telephone services being available. Margaret Read acknowledged that Brent residents had different needs and that this was factored into service planning under the second aim of the strategy. She stated that, at present, there were no plans to cut off any existing communications channels but emphasised that the Council would need to consider ultimately what its channel shift plans should look like going forward. This was particularly prominent because of the ongoing financial pressures facing the Council.

In addition, questions arose on the use of interactive voice response (IVR) telephone handling on the Council's switchboard and how effective this system had been in recognising the wide variety of different accents within the Borough. Margaret Read responded saying that IVR was an effective tool because of the high volume of calls which were successfully routed within human intervention. She outlined that it would be extremely difficult to have staff answer these calls without impacting on overall answer rates because of the sheer number of calls received. The Committee heard that around 80% of calls to the switchboard were directly routed to the correct team that the customer wanted to speak to. This suggested

that the system was working effectively. She also emphasised that it was actually possible to train the IVR technology to be receptive to different accents, which the Council had taken into account. If Members have experienced any issues or residents have reported issues to them, it was specified that these can be reported to servicimprovementteam@brent.gov.uk and they would be investigated with a view to improving recognition rates. Members were also asked to note that if a call was correctly routed but the staff member did not answer the phone, this was a telephone cover issue rather than an automated switchboard issue. Margaret Read said that the re-launch of the Customer Promise principles was aimed at helping to improving answer rates and residents' experience when they contact the Council.

A Member of the Committee also questioned what was planned to improve the Council's email response time to residents. Margaret Read stated that the Council had sought to address this in a number of ways with a key point being to rationalise the number of email inboxes. She also added that the generic customer services email inbox, which a lot of residents used to email the Council, was currently very inefficient as trained customer service staff had had the time consuming task of filtering through a high volume of emails to ensure they were being sent to the correct teams. Margaret Read outlined that ideally the Council would want to move to a model of online forms with drop down menus relating to different service areas which residents could use to raise issues. Once submitted, this form would then land in the correct inbox relating to the resident's issue to be dealt with more quickly and efficiently.

The Chair questioned whether the Community Access Strategy had taken into account 'ghosting' as a technique of testing how accessible different Council services were. He outlined that this process involved following a real-life journey of a service user through the different parts of the Council's system which related to them and identifying any access problems along the way. Margaret Read said that the Council still tended to use 'mystery shopping' to test service access but that the team would be very interested in understanding more about how it could be utilised.

RESOLVED that:

- (i) The progress being made in implementing the aims of the Community Access Strategy be noted;
- (ii) The creation of a new Digital Board to oversee the development of a new Council wide Digital Strategy be noted; and
- (iii) The Community Access Team liaise with relevant contacts at the Salvation Army for more information about 'ghosting' and the role it could play in designing service access pathways.

7. Devolution of Business Rates Task Group

As Chair of the Task Group, Councillor Davidson introduced the report which had been put forward to review the background to the Government's planned devolution of business rates policy and consider how Brent was currently placed to respond to both the risks and opportunities arising from this. Councillor Davidson stated that the Task Group was very pleased with the outcome of the report, and thanked his

fellow task group members for the cross-party effort to address this very important issue facing the Borough.

Councillor Davidson stated the review was effective in looking comprehensively at quite a vague policy concept, and that the Task Group had taken the view that this was a tremendous opportunity for the Council to be proactive in connecting to local businesses and joining up the array of skills which residents in the Borough possess to ensure economic prosperity in Brent for future years. He explained that the review had considered questions on various broad themes, including: central government policy; financial risk; possible impact to Brent and growth in business rate income. From the research into these specific areas, five discovery themes were established and from this the Task Group was able to make eleven key recommendations on the steps Brent should be taking to prepare for this policy coming into effect. He noted that one of the most significant of these was recommendation one within the report which specified the Council developing a robust business rates growth strategy for the whole Borough. The Committee heard that a clear strategy would help act as an incentive to attract businesses to invest in the Borough.

A Member of the Committee asked whether the policy would have a significant impact on the planning developments in the Borough. Councillor Davidson commented that the policy would likely have an impact on the planning strategy but again that it was important to consider potential opportunities. He noted that in particular the Old Oak Common Development may provide opportunities of securing development funding for surrounding areas such as Harlesden. This investment in turn may boost business activity and thereby also boost the Council's business rates tax base. Councillor Miller added that the Council would need to think about the future level footing of business rates and council tax rates relating to planning space within the Borough. He emphasised that the income generated from business rates being devolved was expected to be higher than the income generated from council tax collection when this policy took full effect. He noted that the recommendation of a business strategy being drawn up would include the full implications for planning in Brent.

There were wider discussions from Members at this point about working closely with the Mayor of London on the direction of the spending generated from the 2% Community Infrastructure Levy, and the role this could have in rejuvenating London's high streets, such as ones in Brent. How the proceeds of the levy were spent was noted as potentially having a significant impact on business activity and could thereby have an effect on the business rate base. Members also agreed that Brent should seek closer ties with neighbouring boroughs and collaborative organisations such as the West London Alliance and London Economic Prosperity Board as developments of this policy took shape further.

A question was also raised from a Member on whether, in terms of staff resources, the Council was in position to ensure that business rates could be collected. Councillor Davidson stated that, as it stood, he would not say the Council was adequately prepared in terms of staffing resources. He continued that the report had identified this and that one of the five discovery themes outlined the need for this to be addressed and it was vital that the Council was adequately resourced internally for when this policy came into effect. The Committee heard that the Task Group believed that the income received from the full devolution of business rates

would be as important as the income received from council tax from properties across the Borough. Especially as the Revenue Support Grant from central government was in the process of being phased out. Councillor Davidson proposed an idea, rather than a formal recommendation, that the Cabinet create a specific position for Business in order to oversee this process as it took place.

The Chair asked for additional detail on what would be deemed as '*evidence based*' in the third recommendation of the report for any future increase or decrease in the business rate tax. Councillor Davidson outlined that the current proposal was that Councils could reduce the business rate multiplier by two pence in a pound, and it was suggested that if this were planned in future then Cabinet should be transparent and produce evidence based proposals on why this was being put forward. He noted that any changes of this kind would inevitably be very significant because of the effect on the Council's revenue.

Councillor McLennan (Deputy Leader) offered her thoughts on the Task Group report's findings, stating that she agreed with the content. She noted that many of the areas were already being embraced by the Council in preparation for the devolution of rates coming into effect.

RESOLVED that the Task Group's 11 recommendations, contained within the report, be recommended to Cabinet at a future Cabinet meeting.

8. **Annual Complaints Report 2015/2016**

Peter Gadsdon (the Council's Director of Performance, Policy and Partnerships) introduced the report which provided the Committee with an overview of complaints received by the Council between April 2015 and March 2016. He explained the different stages to the complaints process according to the complaint type and a summary of the corporate complaints process (first stage followed by second stage, before being escalated to the Local Government Ombudsman). It was noted that the Community and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee would hear greater detail about Adult Social Care, Children and Young People and Brent Housing Partnership Complaints (attached as appendices to the report).

Peter Gadsdon emphasised the headline statistics from within the report which were that the number of overall complaints and referrals to the Local Government Ombudsman had decreased, however the number of stage two cases had increased alongside a higher level of compensation being paid by the Council to complainants. He stated that it was a key aim for the Council to improve on resolving issues at the first stage of the complaints process. The Committee noted page 46 of the agenda pack which outlined that the highest number of first stage complaints had arisen from the Regeneration and Environment directorate, however these were usually the most straightforward to resolve. Peter Gadsdon stated that complaints relating to BHP were also at a high level but were often considerably more complex. The Committee was directed to the table under point 3.22 of the report to give an overview of the most common reasons for complaints to arise within the different service areas. Peter Gadsdon concluded that, on the whole, the Council had been doing a lot of things right as the number of complaints had decreased overall however it was still a priority to address the number of stage two complaints and learn from the mistakes in not satisfactorily dealing with issues at the first stage.

A Member of the Committee questioned the extent to which the Council fed back complaints data to respective departments on any patterns that had emerged and how plans were drawn up to address them quickly. Peter Gadsdon stated that the Council had developed various ways in which to do this. This included working closely with Strategic Directors and Heads of Service in regularly reviewing complaints data, with the data also being discussed at Corporate Management Team meetings on a quarterly basis. He also noted that the Council had recently introduced 'portfolio meetings' with Lead Cabinet Members to look at complaints data from within their portfolio. Peter Gadsdon noted that a clear recent example of the Council being receptive to complaints was the recent review of Housing Management Options which had been in part initiated by the noticeable levels of complaints originating from Brent Housing Partnership tenants and leaseholders.

Questions arose from a Member on what the Council's plans were for reducing the level of compensation being paid out to complainants. Peter Gadsdon outlined that the Local Government Ombudsman set the framework for levels of compensation recommended according to the complaint type. This was factored in to what the Council prepared and then proposed to pay out if necessary when a complaint had been escalated. He stated that this arrangement usually resulted in the Ombudsman agreeing with the Council's proposed compensation package to complainants. The Committee heard that it was this Ombudsman framework which guided the compensation levels being paid out by the Council.

A question arose on the report specifying that the baseline satisfaction rate from email responses was often lower than telephone responses, which may represent a problem for the Community Access Strategy's plans to have more residents using online services. Peter Gadsdon responded by stating that, as was mentioned in the Community Access Strategy item, the ideal situation would be a move to online workflow forms with drop down menus relating to the issue being raised by the resident. This would ensure that the email would be directed to the correct team and allow them to be dealt with quicker and more satisfactorily.

RESOLVED that the Committee notes:

- (i) The Council's performance in managing and resolving complaints;
- (ii) The actions being taken to improve response times to complaints and reduce the number of complaints which escalate to stage 2; and
- (iii) The ongoing measures to improve services as a result of complaints and improve the customer experience.

9. Programme of Work/Forward Plan

The Chair made Members aware that there had been one change to the Committee's programme of work in that the Brent High Streets item which had been due to be heard at this meeting, would now be heard at the meeting on 10 January 2017. The change had occurred because of additional fact-finding work that the Committee was undertaking in visits to local high streets around the Borough.

10. Any other urgent business

There was no other urgent business.

11. **Date of next meeting**

The date of the next meeting was noted as 10 January 2017.

The meeting closed at 9.02 pm

COUNCILLOR MATT KELCHER
Chair