



Brent

MINUTES OF THE RESOURCES AND PUBLIC REALM SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
Wednesday 5 September 2018 at 6.00 pm

PRESENT: Councillor Kelcher (Chair), Councillor Kansagra (Vice-Chair) and Councillors Nerva, Gill, S Butt, Gbajumo, Kabir and Mashari

Also Present: Councillors McLennan, Krupa Sheth and Tatler

1. **Apologies for absence and clarification of alternate members**

None.

2. **Declarations of interests**

There were no declarations of interest.

3. **Deputations (if any)**

None.

4. **Minutes of the previous meeting**

RESOLVED: that the minutes of the previous meetings held on 3 July 2018 and 16 July 2018 be approved as accurate records subject to the following amendment: Councillor Butt (Leader of the Council) to be referred to as Councillor M Butt to distinguish from Councillor S Butt, member of the committee.

5. **Matters arising (if any)**

There were no matters arising.

6. **Chair's Report**

The committee considered the Chair's report which provided comment on the committee's work-planning and the research and investigative work undertaken by members in preparation for the meeting.

RESOLVED: that the observations made by the Chair in his report to the committee be noted.

7. **Highways Contract Performance**

Councillor Tatler (Lead Member for Regeneration, Highways and Planning) introduced the report to the committee which outlined the contractual arrangements in place, the measures for auditing performance, current performance levels and how the contract was linked to the Council's Highways Asset Management Plan.

The report detailed that the existing, eight year contract with Conway Aecom was due to finish on 31 March 2021. The contract covered the provision of a range of highway services through the London Highways Alliance Contract (LoHAC), including safety inspections, planned and reactive maintenance, drainage, scheme implementation, and highways structures inspections and maintenance. A key feature of the contract was a lump sum “Find and Fix” mechanism where the contractor delivered the inspection service and rectified high priority defects. A variation to the contract was currently being implemented to exit this arrangement to improve consistency and responsiveness of service. There were a suite of performance indicators which were monitored monthly and were tied in to the payment process to ensure that the monthly amounts certified for payment were directly linked to performance. Auditing by Officers was carried out across all activities of the contract; the on gully cleansing had improved but timeliness of medium priority repairs remained a concern. A range of repair types were being used in a targeted way as part of the council’s Highways Asset Management Programme to improve the longevity of Brent’s roads and pavements and make limited resources go further.

Councillor Tatler advised that Andy Best (Contract Manager, Conway) was in attendance to assist in addressing the committee’s queries, alongside Jonathon Westell (Highways Contracts and Delivery Manager), Chris Whyte (Operational Director, Environment Services) and Amar Dave (Strategic Director, Regeneration and Environment).

The Chair thanked Councillor Tatler for her introduction and welcomed everyone to the meeting, inviting Andy Best to reflect on his experience of the current contract and on working with Brent Council. The committee subsequently queried what factors contributed to delays in repairing defects, what action plans were in place to improve performance and the timescales for improvement against red rated performance indicators. Members expressed concern regarding the time it took for repairs to be made to some Category 2 (medium priority) defects. It was subsequently emphasised the self-monitoring Find and Fix mechanism of the contract created a situation in which it was in the interest of the contractor to categorise defects as Category 2, as the council was required to provide additional funds to the contractor for the repair of such defects. In exploring this issue, members noted the number of defects miscategorised. The committee then questioned the financial and other risks faced by the council as a result of not repairing potentially hazardous paving stones. Comment was sought from the Deputy Leader on the potential increase in the cost of a highways maintenance contract in the future, given the existing state of Brent’s highways and in view of the likely increase in extreme weather conditions.

Andy Best explained that on joining Conway he had identified issues in relation to the carrying out of cyclical activity, such as gully emptying, which had meant that related performance indicators were not being met. These issues had since been resolved and performance had improved. Conway was not currently fully compliant with performance indicators due to a lag in defect rectification; however, this followed a difficult period over the winter and was being addressed. Andy Best confirmed that on joining Conway he had inherited a confrontational relationship between the contractor’s staff and council officers. Efforts had been made to improve this and there was now a good working relationship in place. There remained two years, six months left of the contract and Conway was committed to delivering that contract. The Council and Conway would be entering into a contract deed variation regarding the delivery of defect rectification and that was due to be in place by early October 2018.

Expanding on his comments, Andy Best explained that the number of defects occurring during the 2017/18 winter had been unprecedented. This number had fallen steadily over the summer of 2018 and the latest performance indicators recorded a 95 per cent compliance against the measure for Category 1 defects. For Category 2 defects this stood at approximately 80 per cent. Improving the RAG rating of these measures within an eight week period was considered achievable but could not be guaranteed. Addressing concerns regarding Category 2 defects, Andy Best explained that currently, this category required council officers to instruct Conway to carry out the repairs and provide additional funds to accommodate the cost of the repair. In contrast, Category 1 defects were funded from a lump sum provided by the council and were repaired within 24 hours. It was acknowledged that there had been a small number of mis-categorisation of defects between categories 1 and 2 and that there was a conflict of interest between the two parties with regard to defect categorisation. Andy Best confirmed that Council officers provided very robust challenge on any potential mis-categorisation and highlighted that with the implementation of the deed of contract variation, this matter would no longer be relevant. Chris Whyte (Operational Director, Environment Services) added that the new contractual arrangements would grant the council greater powers to determine repair works. Councillor Tatler added that, moving forward, Councillor Krupa Sheth (Lead Member for Environment) would be conducting a review of contracts to which members would be invited to contribute.

Councillor Tatler confirmed that any defects that posed an immediate danger or risk would be fixed as soon as possible. The council's insurance meant that potential injury claims posed no financial risk. The council maintained a fund to pay small claims and would refer larger claims to the insurance provider. Councillor McLennan advised that all options were being considered regarding Highways repair and maintenance going forward, including reviewing borrowing rates to fund a full repair of Brent's highways, estimated to cost approximately £100m. Chris Whyte further explained that Officers and Lead Members had created a business case for the full repair of Brent's roads, whilst at the same time exploring alternative means for reactive repairs. Some measures had been identified that were both very good and cost effective. Councillor Tatler noted injection patching, rather than full resurfacing, had been a successful and speedy solution. Consideration was being given to undertaking injection patching twice yearly to prepare the roads for winter and summer conditions.

The Chair thanked Andy Best for his contribution to the discussion and Andy Best left the meeting. The committee subsequently addressed a number of queries to the Lead Members and officers. Members questioned whether a single contractor was the best model for delivering highways services or whether the use of multiple smaller contracts could be used to support smaller businesses in Brent. Queries were raised regarding quality control of reactive repairs. The committee noted that the budget for Highways Maintenance was not sufficient and questioned whether consideration had been given to the implications for Brent residents of the funding decisions made for this service.

Councillor Tatler confirmed that the contract deed variation that was shortly due to be finalised would allow the council to explore options for reactive repair works, including contracting to smaller or localised businesses. Referring to the review of contracts to be undertaken by Councillor Krupa Sheth, Amar Dave advised that members would be asked to consider what needed to be delivered, how it would be delivered and for how long. Councillor Tatler agreed that there was not enough money for the full repair and maintenance of Brent's highways but the administration was required to make difficult funding decisions across the council's priorities and this was the political decision that had been made.

Addressing members queries regarding quality control, Chris Whyte emphasised that the internal audit team had audited the quality controls in place and had deemed them robust. Jonathon Westell advised that the team conducted a desktop audit of 100 per cent of repairs made, using the photographs submitted by the contractor after each repair. The contractor was only paid if the quality of the repair was approved via this audit process. This monthly desktop audit was undertaken by a team of two officers and site visits could be conducted when necessary. Chris Whyte added that following the contract deed variation, the council's on-street resources would be increased.

The Chair thanked the officers and Lead Members for their attendance

Requests for information

During the discussion it was agreed that the following information requested by the committee but not available at the meeting, would be provided to following the meeting:

- information on the longest time a Category 2 defect remained unresolved;
- the number of deductions made each month due to work being completed inadequately; and,
- an appraisal of how much a new Highways Contract would cost the council in two years' time.

RESOLVED:

- i) That the Strategic Director, Regeneration and Environment ensure an update is provided to the committee in two months' time on the performance achieved against the indicators set out in the report (PI 1, 2, 3, 5 and 8).
- ii) That the Cabinet note the committee's view that no self-monitoring contracts be entered into by the council in the future;
- iii) That discussions be held by the Chair, members of the committee and officers regarding the potential to undertake specific scrutiny work appraising options for the repair of Brent's highways, including consideration of funding via long term borrowing.
- iv) That the committee endorse the statement of the Lead Member for Regeneration, Highways and Planning thanking the officers for their hard work in managing the Highways Contract.

8. Digital Strategy progress and outcomes for vulnerable people

The Chair informed the meeting that the committee had recently undertaken a visit to the Harlesden Hub, during which members had had the opportunity to learn about how the council was supporting vulnerable residents. At the invitation of the Chair, Councillor McLennan (Deputy Leader) advised that Sadie East (Head of Transformation) and Peter Gadsdon (Director Performance Policy & Partnerships)

were in attendance to introduce the report and assist in addressing members queries.

Sadie East presented the report on the progress of the Brent Digital Strategy from its launch in June 2017. The report provided details of key projects and workstreams related to channel shift and the initiatives designed to support vulnerable residents, as well as the wider work within the delivery of the strategy to secure positive outcomes for vulnerable people. Sadie East provided a brief overview of these key workstreams, noting the initial successes of the roll out of the Microsoft Dynamics Platform to the Housing Management Service which had already resulted in improvements in customer service and quality of response. Work to support residents' to improve their digital skills had included the impending launch of a digital skills curriculum by Brent Start (Brent's Adult Education service) and the introduction of cutting edge technology to a classroom of the Stonebridge Learning Centre. Progress had been made in securing ultrafast fibre broadband for Brent's social housing stock and more widely for residents and business in the borough. By 2020 new broadband networks were anticipated to provide coverage to up to 80% of the borough. The committee further heard that a report recommending approval to expand the hub model was due to be considered by Cabinet at its meeting on 12 September 2018.

The Chair thanked Sadie East for the introduction and invited questions from the committee. Members sought details of how success was measured with regard to supporting residents' digital skills, including whether a one-off lesson could be offered for those engaging with a service digitally for the first time. The committee also questioned whether the council could enhance the profile of the My Brent service to encourage greater take up. Questions were raised regarding how support was provided for those who either did not have internet access or were not in the habit of using it, how the council identified users requiring special assistance and how this information was deployed across the organisation. A member questioned why council officers working at the Harlesden Hub did not access the library's free wi-fi. Further queries were raised regarding the Client Index, its current use in the council and whether it could support targeted roll-out of the council's digital offer. In concluding their questioning, members expressed that they had been very impressed with the Harlesden Hub and asked officers to reflect on any pitfalls that may have been identified and resolved via the pilot.

Responding to members' queries, Sadie East drew the committee's attention to the draft outcomes framework attached at Appendix E to the report. This outlined the key objectives around modernising online channels and supporting residents to access online services and included proposed measures and baselines. Members further heard that officers were exploring the use of the Microsoft Dynamics platform to better capture the interactions at the Harlesden Hub. Officers welcomed members' suggestions on the promotion of the My Brent service and the provision of one-off skills sessions to those accessing services digitally for the first time and agreed to take these forward. Matthew Dibben (Head of Employment Skills and Enterprise) confirmed that the latter could be provided as part of the expanded digital skills programme due to be launched by Brent Start in the next few weeks.

Addressing the committee's queries regarding residents who either could not use the internet or were not in the habit of doing so, Sadie East confirmed that visitors to the Harlesden Hub had included people who were digitally excluded and added

that word of mouth advertising of the support available at the Hub had been successful in reaching some people from this cohort. Peter Gadsdon advised that Lewisham Council had recently obtained funding to buy iPads to loan to residents to help them become confident with the technology. If successful, consideration could be given to the provision of a similar facility at Brent's libraries. It was further emphasised that the agreement recently made by the council with two providers to deliver affordable ultrafast broadband connections to Brent's housing stock included the delivery of digital inclusion activities for key groups. Peter Gadsdon clarified that it was anticipated that residents benefiting from this new infrastructure would be able to access a reasonable package for approximately £5 per month which would, for instance, be sufficient for streaming services. With regard to residents that might require additional assistance, officers were exploring whether the Microsoft Dynamics system could be used to flag records where additional needs had been identified. With the instigation of the EU General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR), the council had been required to revise all of the privacy notices provided at the point of gathering an individual's data: these now stated that information would be shared across the council's systems.

With regard to officers at the Harlesden Hub using Wi-fi, Peter Gadsdon explained that as the Hub was a pilot, the council had not invested too much in its set up. However, as part of the council's changing methodology regarding the delivery of services, the council would be replacing the current thin client access and remote working options for council staff, with laptops with a direct connection to the council's network.

A brief overview was provided to the committee of the council's Client Index. Peter Gadsdon advised that this was a master data management system which pulled data from a number of council systems and data matched the records. The Client Index was still extensively used for a range of functions including fraud detection. A recent upgrade of the Client Index had delivered a new facility, Business Process Manager. It was possible to use the Client Index to provide a targeted communication regarding the council's digital offer. The Microsoft Dynamics system currently being built would eventually make the Client Index redundant.

Reflecting on the Harlesden Hub pilot, Peter Gadsdon confirmed that the most difficult part of the project had been building the relationships with the various voluntary sector partners to ensure that the offer provided was localised. Repeating this process for each roll-out area was essential, as it was this crafting of the offer that underpinned its value for local residents and provided momentum to the project. Sadie East emphasised that the word-of-mouth advertising had been key to the success of the Harlesden Hub pilot.

The Chair thanked the officers and Lead Member for their contribution to the meeting.

RESOLVED:

- i) That the Director of Performance, Policy and Partnerships ensure that officers explore ways to incentivise residents to sign up for a My Brent Account;

- ii) That the Director of Performance, Policy and Partnerships ensure that consideration is given to how to assess the success of face-to-face interactions at Harlesden Hub or the Brent Civic Centre supporting residents in acquiring digital skills, including how well those skills are able to be utilised subsequently. The outcome of this process to be feedback to the committee;
- iii) That the Director of Performance, Policy and Partnerships ensure a targeted communication is sent promoting the council's digital offer to those groups identified as requiring assistance with digital skills;
- iv) That the minutes of the meeting be shared with the Lead Member for Schools, Employment and Skills and Lead Member for Housing and Welfare Reform for comment on the committee's discussion;
- v) That the Director of Performance, Policy and Partnerships ensure the ICT set up in the Harlesden Hub is reviewed to support access improvements and enable staff quick access to council server.

9. **Area Based Working Update**

At the invitation of the Chair, Councillor Tatler (Lead Member for Regeneration, Highways and Planning) introduced the report on the progress made by the Town Centre Managers and Neighbourhood Managers leading on the council's new area based approach. The report before the committee summarised the achievements made in the first six to fifteen months of operation of four Town Centre Managers (TCMs) and the first seven months of operation for the five Neighbourhood Managers (NMs). The report also summarised the objectives and deliverables for 2018/19 and the medium-long term plans. Councillor Tatler emphasised that the approach described recognised that each area had different needs and requirements. Councillor Krupa Sheth (Lead Member for Environment) highlighted that there had been lots of positive feedback from residents, businesses and community groups regarding the new area based approach and work of the NMs and TCMs.

The Chair welcomed Shirley Holmes (NM), Rubina Charalambous (TCM) and Richard Hay (TCM) to the meeting, alongside officers Matthew Dibben (Head of Employment Skills and Enterprise), Simon Finney (Head of Neighbourhood Management) and Rosalyn Flowers (Economic Growth Senior Manager).

In the subsequent discussion, the committee questioned whether NMs and TCMs would develop closer working relationships with the ward councillors for their areas, noting the scope for both strategic and resident level working. Clarification was sought regarding the working relationships between NMs and TCMs, noting that certain issues impacted across the remits. The committee further noted that some NMs made greater use of social media, for instance to engage with resident forums, and questioned how the council could support NMs in developing social media skills. The committee asked the NMs and TCMs to comment on whether there were any additional resources or tools that would help to increase the productivity of their roles. The committee subsequently queried what support was available to NMs and TCMs.

Councillor Krupa Sheth advised that it had recently been determined that monthly meetings would be held with NMs, TCMs and ward councillors. Councillor Tatler added that the TCMs had been established for a longer period and there was an expectation that they involved local councillors in any developments for their areas. Furthermore, action plans had been developed in consultation with ward members and were regularly reviewed. Going forward, TCMs would be asked to involve ward members in the review of these plans.

Clarifying the roles and expected working relationships between TCMs and NMs, Councillor Tatler advised that they worked jointly across their respective remits to achieve improvements for their areas. NMs' primary focus was public realm issues and addressing these would deliver outcomes that would support the work of TCMs. Discussing the use of social media, Simon Finney agreed that training could be provided to encourage greater use by NMs and TCMs and advised that challenge would be provided going forward on this issue. Responding to the committee's queries regarding resources, Richard Hay advised that a lot of the necessary tools were already in place to support his role as TCM and commented on the importance of joint working with NMs to resolve issues. Richard Hay expressed that providing hospitality was not a necessarily element of his role and rather, as long as TCMs were approachable connections were made organically. Chris Whyte emphasised that since the NM posts were established they had largely been a standalone resource, however plans were now in place to expand the area based working approach to provide dedicated services around these positions, for instance, allocating dedicated enforcement officers

With the permission of the Chair, a member of the public commented positively on the NM and TCM roles and highlighted a number of issues for attention. Chris Whyte agreed to follow these matters up with the resident and NM as appropriate.

The Chair thanked everyone for their contribution to the meeting.

RESOLVED:

- i) The committee expressed its thanks to all the officers involved for their hard work;
- ii) That the Cabinet note the committee's endorsement of the move towards neighbourhood based working;
- iii) That the Strategic Director for Regeneration and Environment ensure that the council offer training to all Neighbourhood Managers and Town Centre Managers to ensure all officers in these positions have sufficient skills to utilise social media to support their work with the community and report back to the committee on the impact of this training.

10. **Committee work programme 2018/19**

RESOLVED: that the work programme for 2018/19 as set out at Appendix A to the report be agreed.

11. **Any other urgent business**

None.

The meeting closed at 8.02 pm

M KELCHER
Chair