



Brent

MINUTES OF THE RESOURCES AND PUBLIC REALM SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Thursday 7 February 2019 at 7.30 pm

PRESENT: Councillor Kelcher (Chair), Councillor and Councillors Nerva, S Butt, Gbajumo, Kabir, Mashari and Colwill

Also Present: Councillor McLennan

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

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Gill and Kansagra. Councillor Colwill was attending the meeting as a substitute member on behalf of Councillor Kansagra.

2. **Declarations of interests**

For purposes of transparency, Councillor Mashari advised that she volunteered at Sufra NW London foodbank.

3. **Deputations (if any)**

None.

4. **Minutes of the previous meeting**

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 15 January 2019 were agreed as an accurate record of the meeting.

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

6. **Chair's Report**

The committee considered the Chair's report which included comment on the agenda for the current meeting, reasons for the selection of topics, and highlighted work of the committee outside of public meetings.

The Chair noted that with the committee's agreement the first item on the agenda, Parking and Electric Vehicle Charging, would be postponed to the meeting due to be held on 15 April 2019. There was also to be a further addition to the work programme for the 15 April 2019 meeting to examine the Deloitte Sports Business Group report on the Economic impact of Wembley Stadium for the 2017/18 event season, published in December 2018. Representatives of the Deloitte Sports Business Group and the Football Association would be invited to attend.

RESOLVED: that the report of the Chair of the Resources and Public Realm Scrutiny Committee be noted.

7. Parking and Electric Vehicle Charging

RESOLVED: that consideration of this report be deferred to the meeting of the Resources and Public Realms Scrutiny Committee scheduled for 15 April 2019.

8. Complaints Annual Report 2017 - 2018

Councillor McLennan introduced the Complaints Annual Report 2017 – 2018 to the committee which focussed on the nature of complaints and the learning and improvements from complaints and Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) cases. Customer Services and Parking Enforcement were the top two complaint themes across the Council. The former mostly related to the Housing Management service, with which historically there had been a number of issues; this service had recently been brought back in house. Overall there had been improvements in the volume and timeliness with which complaints were addressed which reflected the hard work of the Performance Team with service areas. Councillor McLennan introduced Irene Bremang (Head of Performance and Improvement) to the committee, advising that she was present to help address members' queries.

In the subsequent discussion the committee emphasised the importance of the neutrality of the Annual Complaints Report and highlighted that both increases and decreases in complaints for different service areas were interpreted as positive trends, with the former cited as an example of improved customer awareness of how to make a complaint. Councillor McLennan welcomed and accepted the feedback and explained that service areas were encouraged to view complaints as a means of service improvement.

The committee then questioned what evidence was drawn upon to determine when a service had acted correctly. Comment was sought on whether the categorisation of the cause of a complaint as 'customer dissatisfaction with a policy decision' could obscure incidents of poor customer care and it was queried whether the Deputy Leader would support a greater emphasis on customer care in the recruitment process. Further comment was sought on the reduction in the percentage of stage 2 corporate complaints resolved within the target timescales. Queries were raised regarding the implementation of LGO recommendations and how the learning from these was embedded across the organisation. Members questioned how the council ensured that all departments followed the same robust approach to resolving and acting upon complaints. It was queried why the benchmarking data provided was not drawn from neighbouring boroughs. Members highlighted that residents had reported difficulties in getting through to the council via telephone and sought an update on the matter. The committee questioned whether the council could broaden the ways in which people could submit feedback, for example by providing emoji reaction buttons to indicate positive or negative experiences for those using the council's online services. In concluding their questioning, the committee asked what further analysis could be undertaken to provide assurance that members' expectations would be met with respect to those areas with the greatest volume of complaints.

In response to the queries raised, Irene Bremang explained that all complainants had the right to proceed to stage 2 of the procedure and further if they felt their complaint had not been addressed satisfactorily at the first stage. If the complainant was objecting to a decision determined by council policy, the service area was deemed to be not at fault and this would be reflected in the council's response to each stage of a complaint. It was emphasised that there was no excuse for poor customer care and members' attention was directed to Appendix C which set out a root cause analysis of complaints and associated remedial actions. There were 237 complaints related to customer care in Brent Housing Partnership/Housing Management, of those 181 had been upheld. The Complaints Team had worked closely with the service area to identify issues and an action plan was in place which included customer service training to be provided across the whole service. Councillor McLennan confirmed that she would be supportive of a greater emphasis on customer care in the recruitment process, if existing provision was not sufficient; however, noted that the expectation was that if the council's standards were not being met, this should be addressed via the capability procedure.

Addressing members' concerns regarding the timeliness of Stage 2 complaints, Irene Bremang highlighted that the challenge principally related to the Children's Statutory Complaints procedure. Whilst there was only a small number of cases per year, these were very complex and required investigation by an independent investigator. The Complaints Team have implemented a tracker to monitor Children's Statutory Complaints. It was noted that there had been a significant improvement in the timeliness of dealing with corporate complaints.

Irene Bremang explained that LGO responses and decisions were reviewed by the Complaints Team and senior managers to ensure that any learning points for the organisation were captured. There had been 168 complaints referred to the LGO for 2017/18: approximately half of these were returned to the council for local resolution and 21 had been upheld. The recommendations of the LGO in such cases would be discussed with the senior managers of the relevant service area to ensure they were appropriately implemented. The LGO also provided an annual report to the council and this was analysed and discussed with the Council Management Team which comprised the Chief Executive, Strategic Directors and other senior officers. Part of the analysis of the annual report included a review of the outcomes and remedies at the first and second stage prior to escalation to the LGO.

There was an expectation that all complaints were addressed with the principles of best practice in mind; namely early resolution where possible, clear responses setting out corrective action and, where a complaint is upheld, ensuring an apology is issued. However, it was important that service areas tailored the response as appropriate for the service user. Councillor McLennan emphasised that the Cabinet also received quarterly complaints report to enable collective monitoring across Lead Members' portfolio areas.

The committee was further informed by Irene Bremang that benchmarking data had been drawn from other councils' published data. Unfortunately, there was no requirement to publish information on non-statutory complaints and therefore, it was not always possible to obtain comparable data from neighbouring authorities. Councillor McLennan welcomed the suggestion to broaden the modes of feedback

for residents and added that the council's telephony system was shortly due to be changed.

The committee was assured by Irene Bremang that there were a number of improvement plans in place to address reoccurring issues in the Housing Management Service. A summary of the improvement actions were listed in the Root Cause Summary Report in Appendix C. The complaints for the parking service related principally to parking tickets or to a perceived lack of enforcement action, both of which fed into officers' review of enforcement activity. It was emphasised that the council fostered a learning culture around complaints and took complaints very seriously.

During the discussion, the committee requested that the following information, which could not be provided during the meeting, be made available to the committee subsequently:

- anonymised LGO recommendations made to the council in the resolution of complaints;
- confirmation of whether any disciplinary action had been taken against any council staff for reasons of persistent poor customer care.
- An update on the back-log of blue badge applications.

RESOLVED:

- i) That it be noted that Cabinet approved the Annual Complaints Report at its meeting on 10 December 2018;
- ii) That Brent Council's performance in managing and resolving complaints be noted;
- iii) That the Deputy Leader, together with the Strategic Director of Resources ensure consideration is given to promoting good customer service skills and experience via the recruitment process;
- iv) That the Director, Performance, Policy and Partnerships provide an overview of the features of the new telephony system due to be used by the council, including whether it logged callers who had hung up due to a long wait and timescales for full implementation.
- v) That the Deputy Leader, together with the Director, Performance, Policy and Partnerships consider ways to broaden opportunities for members of the public to provide feedback to the council across different means of interaction, including the provision of an online feedback mechanism, such as emoji reaction buttons.

9. **Food banks task group update**

The committee received an update report on the progress made against the 36 recommendations set out in 'The Use of Food Banks in Brent' task group report, first published in November 2017. The recommendations were aimed at the council and other organisations including the NHS, foodbanks, the West London Business Alliance, the Department for Work and Pensions, and central government. Members' attention was drawn to the table set out at the end of the update report which provided a summary of the progress made against each of the recommendations. Overall the council had made good progress on those recommendations for which it had oversight and continued to develop good

partnership working to support implementation of some of the more complex recommendations. The recommendations for other organisations had been forward to the relevant teams and recommendations aimed directly at foodbanks would be reviewed through the foodbank network.

The report detailed that the council would continue to work closely with its partners to mitigate the impact that surrounded food insecurity and related issues. It was highlighted that the Policy and Scrutiny Team facilitated the creation of the network of food banks, with its first meeting taking place on 17 January 2019. This was a key step that would enable the sharing of best practice and greater collaborative working between food aid providers and their partners. Further support would be provided to the network including training by the council's Regulatory Services on food safety. The Deputy Leader highlighted that a Food Banks Champion had also now been appointed and was one of the committee's own members, Councillor Mashari, who had Chaired the task group on Food Banks.

Councillor Mashari noted that one of the key recommendations of the task group had been that the council should show strategic leadership with respect to foodbank usage in Brent and emphasised that it was difficult for the council to do so without appropriate monitoring of the scale of the issue. The Deputy Leader agreed and advised that this would be an appropriate function for the Food Banks Champion to take forward, with the support of the council. The Deputy Leader emphasised that this was an issue taken very seriously by the Cabinet and indeed, all members of the council.

During the discussion, the committee requested that the following information, which could not be provided during the meeting, be made available to the committee subsequently:

An update be provided on the progress of the following recommendations of the task group:

- The creation of a council policy on Foodbanks;
- The Cabinet Member for Housing and Welfare Reform to write to the Secretary of State at the DWP outlining the problems caused by UC and other welfare reforms and request for central Government to formally track and monitor food bank usage;
- The Leader should advocate for change in this area via the LGA, LEP and West London Alliance and London Councils and report back in writing to the Scrutiny Committee.

RESOLVED:

- i) That Cabinet note the committee's view of the importance of the council assuming a strategic leadership role with respect to the issues driving foodbank usage in Brent;
- ii) That a meeting be arranged between the Cabinet Member for Housing and Welfare Reform and the Foodbank Champion to progress the recommendations of the task group, as set out in the report 'The Use of Food Banks in Brent', and other associated actions, and that this meeting be open to all members of the Resources and Public Realm Scrutiny Committee.

- iii) That members propose a motion for a non-cabinet member debate to be held at full council with the video produced by the task group on food banks shown in introduction to the debate.

10. Budget proposals

The committee reviewed the council's budget proposals for 2019/20 and 2020/21 which were due to be considered by Cabinet at its meeting on 11 February 2019. The committee had considered a previous iteration of the budget proposals at its meeting on 15 January 2019, when it had reviewed and endorsed the report of the Budget Scrutiny Panel. The Chair highlighted that the views of the committee, along with the recommendations of the Budget Scrutiny Panel, had informed the current version before members. In particular, the Chair welcomed the adoption of a number of key recommendations of the Budget Scrutiny Panel including rejection of the proposals to reduce library opening hours and rejection of the closure of Abbey Road, Brent Reuse and Recycling Facility. There remained however, a number of areas where further feedback would need to be sought from Cabinet.

It was noted that the Budget report set out details of the consultation, scrutiny and equalities processes undertaken with regard to the proposals and revealed the overall financial position facing the council over the following four year period, including risks, issues and uncertainties. The Chair informed the committee that Councillor McLennan (Deputy Leader) and Ravinder Jassar (Head of Finance) were present to address members' queries.

In the subsequent discussion, the committee noted that there was a history of certain departments overspending and underspending, and assurance was sought that this was appropriately accounted for when setting the budgets for these departments. Members questioned whether consultation via Brent Connects was productive and queried whether the council could do anything to attract a greater level of engagement, including reviewing the accessibility of locations. Clarification was sought on how the anticipated additional licensing income from events held at Wembley Stadium would be distributed and whether consideration had been given to compensating the residents most affected by the events. A member suggested that improved public transport signage and indicators would be beneficial to the borough. Highlighting the committee's suggestion made at its last meeting that consideration be given to developing a more strategic and co-ordinated approach to Neighbourhood Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) funds, the committee questioned how this could be considered as part of the budget formulation process. Assurance was sought that the £600k 'pothole' fund provided by Central Government would be used solely for the repair of the Brent's roads. The committee questioned whether the council was consulted about the increase in the Mayor's precept and the impact that this increase was likely to have on Brent's residents. Members queried who would be affected by the reduction in council tax support, proposed for 2020/21, and sought details of the council's policy with regard to using bailiffs to collect unpaid council tax.

In response to the questions raised, Ravinder Jassar confirmed that the budgets were correctly set at the start of the year. The departmental overspend for Children and Young People was borne of an increase in the numbers of Looked After Children and children subject to child protection plans. The underspend for

Regeneration and Environment was a result of early savings and in-year vacancies. Councillor McLennan advised that funding for Children and Young People was a cross-London issue and London Councils was lobbying for greater funding from central government.

Councillor McLennan welcomed any suggestions for enhancing future budget consultations and explained that whilst Brent Connects meetings were a major forum for consultation, they were only one medium through which face to face consultation had been undertaken. Going forward there would be a greater use of social media and other online platforms to increase the council's reach.

Addressing a number of queries, Ravinder Jassar confirmed the anticipated additional income from Wembley Stadium events was not ring-fenced and assured members that the £600k pothole funding would be spent on Brent's roads, adding that the council was required to evidence this to central government. The council was not consulted on the increase in the Mayor's precept, as the GLA had its own consultation process, however, the council had made it clear that the overall increase facing residents was 5.7 percent. Councillor McLennan confirmed that Brent's Council Tax Support Scheme would remain the same for 2019/20 and was currently being reviewed for 2020/21 to ensure it was fit for purpose following the roll out of Universal Credit. Going forward the emphasis of the scheme would be to ensure those who were in work but on low incomes were supported. Members heard that council tax collection had been brought back in-house and that the Council Tax Protocol ensured that Bailiffs were only used for cases where prosecution was deemed appropriate.

Concluding the discussion, the Chair thanked everyone for their contribution and reflected on the challenges facing the council and the strategic value of setting a two year budget. The committee was advised that a statement of the committee's views with respect to the budget proposals would be submitted to Cabinet for consideration at its meeting on 11 February 2019.

During the discussion, the committee requested that the following action be undertaken:

- a meeting be arranged between Councillor Nerva and Councillor Tatler (Lead Member for Regeneration, Highways and Planning) to discuss implementing a co-ordinated approach to the use of Neighbourhood CIL.

11. **Any other urgent business**

None.

The meeting closed at 8.51 pm

M KELCHER
Chair