



Brent

MINUTES OF THE RESOURCES AND PUBLIC REALM SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Tuesday 6 September 2022 at 6.00 pm

PRESENT: Councillor Conneely (Chair), Councillor Long (Vice-Chair) and Councillors Moghaddam, Akram, S Butt, Bajwa, Georgiou, Miller, Mitchell, Patel and Shah

Also Present: Councillors Mili Patel (Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance, Resources & Reform) for item 7 and Southwood (Cabinet Member for Jobs, Economy & Citizen Experience) for item 6.

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

None received.

2. **Declarations of interests**

No interests were declared at the meeting.

3. **Deputations (if any)**

None.

4. **Minutes of the previous meeting**

It was **RESOLVED** that the minutes of the previous meeting held on 19 July 2022 be approved as an accurate record.

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

The Committee were updated that following a deputation received by the Committee in the last Municipal Year from a resident, Mr Philip Grant, an assurance had been received by the Chair in terms of the accuracy of the information presented at the meeting. It was expressed that clarity of language would be welcomed in future to ensure the confidence of information being shared to the Committee.

6. **Cost of Living crisis**

Councillor Eleanor Southwood (Cabinet Member for Jobs, Economy & Citizen Experience) introduced a report, updating the Scrutiny Committee on actions being taken by the Council to mitigate the impact of the Cost of Living crisis in Brent and updating the Committee on progress with the Cost of Living themed Outcome Based Review (OBR). Members noted the OBR had been established to investigate the issues arising from the Cost of Living Crisis as well as considering future solutions and had involved considerable input from local stakeholders and

partners, who were supporting residents on the ground. Members were also welcomed and encouraged to play a part in this process, where possible.

Peter Gadsdon (Corporate Director Resident Services) and Tom Cattermole (Director of Customer Access) were present alongside Sadie East (Director of Transformation), to answer questions from the Committee, which are noted below:

- Regarding the current challenges of delivery of these projects; it was noted that work had taken place alongside London Community Kitchen to provide free school meals to residents. The research of the Outcome Based Review would help to observe how closely linked mental health was with the Cost of Living Crisis, as well as the importance of early intervention so that residents were able to approach the Council at an early stage. There have also been delivery gaps with partners on health issues, on which the Council was working with GPs for referrals to circle back to the Council around debt issues.
- Further to partnership working, it was asked how the Council was linking with the NHS on the Cost of Living Crisis. There were discussions ongoing with the NHS to ensure that residents going from hospital to home would have safe, heated conditions. The Council were also waiting for confirmation from the Secretary of State to sign off on future funding for the Household Support Fund.
- It was suggested that detail of the NHS' communications plan be shared with residents. It was agreed that this would be circulated with Members.
- From the support outlined in the paper, details were sought on the funding being provided by Brent and how much was coming from central government. It was agreed that Officers could create a document to signpost exactly how this money was set out. The Council was currently providing significant support to residents, which would increase in the coming months.
- Referring to the extra £3 million pledged to the Residents' Support Fund, it was asked whether this would be able to cover the likely increase in demand on the scheme. It was updated that this figure would be clarified as part of the Council's budget discussions, as well as funding received from Central Government with early intervention being prioritised.
- Regarding the current wait time of 8 weeks on a Residents' Support Fund application, it was updated that this time frame was due to the volume of requests since the Cost of Living Crisis had begun. There was an option on the form to fast track emergency applications, which were then completed within two days. There was additional emergency support available through Brent Community Hubs.
- It was highlighted that residents who had an overdraft on their debit or credit card could potentially lead to debt. To this end, it was asked whether there was there a London wide approach to residents who did not qualify for available support. This had been discussed within the GLA and London Councils in terms of a robust safety net, with financial advice services bringing together all advice agencies and support available. Brent had been involved in the pilot of this initiative, as part of a localised and London wide offer. Interest free loans through a credit union were also offered to residents through the Residents Support Fund.
- Regarding businesses, it was asked what support the Council had available to businesses, specifically small businesses who were also experiencing financial difficulties. A toolkit for businesses was being put together to compile

the support that was available to them in terms of national support. Longer term, there was an ambition for businesses to be more energy efficient going forwards.

- Regarding timescales for the advisory group for those affected by fuel poverty, it was updated that currently, the aim was to have something in place for November, which would cover the procurement period and the subsequent mobilisation period. Moving on to the work around the Community Shop project, it was updated that work alongside the voluntary sector and food banks was currently underway.
- It was asked how the Council was hearing from different cohorts and residents; it was noted that in the case of Council tenants there was frequent dialogue, and community groups who were working with residents on a day to day basis were made aware of what the Council could offer. Part of the solution was going out to residents rather than waiting for residents to approach the Council. In terms of communications plans, a lot of the work around the vaccinations programme was attempting to be emulated as part of the Cost of Living Crisis.
- It was noted that the Local Housing Allowance (LHA) remained low for residents, and it was asked if lobbying was ongoing to central Government on this issue. This was highlighted as being a particular problem for Brent compared to other London boroughs and work would go ahead to rejuvenate lobbying on this issue.
- The lessons learned from the last Financial Inclusion communications campaign was that a multi-channel approach from trusted sources in the community was vital in communicating messages to residents.
- With regard to pet expenses, it was asked if this was an issue for residents' living costs. It was reported that there was anecdotal evidence of those abandoning pets, and it was being explored whether this had any correlation with the Cost of Living Crisis.
- Members sought further details around the 8-week wait time for the RSF, with an assurance being sought that residents were being signposted very clearly to support packages. There was a route for those with the greatest need to be accessed quickly and in a more urgent way.
- It was asked what the measurable impact of the Financial Inclusion data had gleaned so far. It was noted that correlation had been seen, in terms of areas of deprivation in the borough having the greatest need accessing the Residents Support Fund more frequently.
- It was asked about a potential increase in gambling, particularly online as a result of the Cost of Living Crisis and whether this had been borne out in the data. It was updated that there was no anecdotal evidence at this stage of that being the case, but that applications could be reviewed to analyse whether this was the case.
- It was asked if Brent was taking part in the national Warm Hubs programme for residents. It was clarified that the Civic Centre would be a warm hub, and partners were being spoken to across the borough to present a comprehensive list to residents.

The Chair thanked those present for their contributions to the discussion, and closed the item by summarising the Recommendations, Suggestions for Improvement and Information Requests made by the Committee, which are noted below:

The Committee made the following recommendations:

- i. Lobby central government for increase to the Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates to help alleviate the burden of the cost of living crisis on residents
- ii. Use the Council's role and relationship with the NHS to lobby for more support for our residents to strengthen our efforts in helping them through the cost of living crisis.

The Committee noted the following suggestions for improvement:

- i. Improve our publicity of credit unions within the borough, highlighting how residents can use these services to navigate the cost of living crisis.
- ii. Explore co-operative options with regards to the Community Shop model.
- iii. Incorporate NHS support for residents into the Council's Cost of Living communications plan.

The Committee noted the following Information requests:

- i. Provide a breakdown of different sources of funding for the Cost of Living initiatives (i.e. funding received from central government, including any new monies, as well as the funding coming from the Council's own income).
- ii. Provide the Committee with a copy of the Financial Inclusion Dashboard Presentation that was previously presented to the Audit and Standards Advisory Committee on 1 August 2022.
- iii. Provide information on the support the Council and central government are offering to businesses impacted by the Cost of Living crisis.
- iv. Provide a copy of the Cost of Living communications plan.
- v. Provide feedback from the NHS on any support for residents to navigate cost of living crisis.
- vi. Provide intelligence/data (if any) to Committee on whether Gambling is a trend amongst Resident Support Fund applications.

7. Budget Scrutiny Task Group

The Committee received a report for the Committee to establish a Scrutiny Task Group to consider the Cabinet's budget proposals for 2023-24.

Having considered the report it was AGREED:

- (1) That a Budget Scrutiny Task Group be established, as set out within the report.
- (2) To approve the terms of reference for the Task Group as follows:
 1. To consider the Cabinet's budget proposals for 2023-24
 2. Receive evidence from Cabinet Members, senior departmental officers, and any other relevant stakeholders
 3. Agree a draft report to comment on the budget proposals for submission to the Resources and Public Realm Scrutiny Committee for ratification and submission to Cabinet.

8. **Scrutiny Work Plan 2022/23 update**

The Committee considered and noted and the updated work plan for the 2022-23 Municipal Year.

9. **Scrutiny Progress Update - Recommendation Tracker**

The Committee received and noted an update on the Recommendations Tracker.

10. **Any other urgent business**

None.

The meeting closed at 7.42pm.

Councillor Rita Conneely
Chair