



## **MINUTES OF THE RESOURCES AND PUBLIC REALM SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

### **Tuesday 24 January 2023 at 6.00 pm**

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

Also Present: Councillors M Butt (Leader of the Council), Mili Patel (Deputy Leader & Cabinet Member for Finance, Resources & Reform) and Collymore (Budget Scrutiny Task Group member).

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

Apologies were received from Peter Gadsdon (Corporate Director of Resident Services) with Tom Cattermole (Director Customer Access) attending as a representative and Councillor Ketan Sheth (as a further member of the Budget Scrutiny Task Group)

The Chair took the opportunity to welcome Janet Latinwo to the Resources & Public Realm Scrutiny Committee in her new role as Head of Strategy and Partnerships and Statutory Scrutiny Officer for Brent and to thank Lorna Hughes (Director of Communities), , for the support she had provided to the Committee, as the previous Head of Service and Statutory Scrutiny Officer

#### **2. Declarations of interests**

There were no declarations of interest shared.

#### **3. Deputations (if any)**

None.

#### **4. Minutes of the previous meeting**

It was RESOLVED that the minutes of the previous meetings held on 15 December 2022 and 8 November 2022 (which had been resubmitted for final approval following their initial consideration in December 2022) be approved as a correct record.

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

None.

#### **6. Budget Scrutiny Task Group Findings**

Councillor Conneely, as Chair introduced the final report and detailed findings from the Budget Scrutiny Task Group. The Task Group had been established in September 2022 to undertake a joint review, with members of the Community and

Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee of the Council's draft budget proposals for 2023/24. Having outlined the process for the review, she advised the Committee that the task group had now concluded, with a report and recommendations provided for adoption by the Committee ahead of the report going to Cabinet for consideration as part of the main budget report in February 2022.

As context to the review, it was noted that the Task Group had recognised the impact of the challenging financial environment in which the Council was operating given the long-term reduction in Government funding, level of savings already achieved, current economic challenges and increasing complexity of demand for Council services on development of the budget proposals that would continue to provide effective services for residents, protect the most vulnerable residents, and provide the necessary investment in Brent's future. It was felt that the continued financial cuts had left Local Authorities having to provide more services with less funding which the Task Group had felt required recognition and a fairer funding settlement by central government.

The Committee recognised the challenges in balancing the provision of effective services to residents against a reduced funding settlement especially when coupled with additional cost pressures due to the national financial instability and as such had made a number of recommendations for consideration as part of the budget setting process, which had been set out in the final Task Group report. Inviting questions and comments on the main Task Group findings and recommendations, the following key points were discussed:

- The Committee felt that further consideration should take place in terms of regularising parking arrangements for motorbikes via permits, bringing Brent into line with other London boroughs. It was felt important to acknowledge that many bike users that used their motorbikes for employment purposes were employed in some of the lowest paid jobs in the borough and as such costs should be looked at carefully. Additionally, it was felt that at present the borough was not maximising income generation from parking charges as motorbikes were able to park in parking bays at no cost, taking a space away from a car that would be paying to park there. It was suggested that dedicated motorbike bays would support generating income from parking and should be considered. In response to the issues raised Councillor M Butt, Leader of the Council agreed that a wider conversation was required in terms of motorbike permits, looking at which locations in the borough would be most affected and bearing in mind the existing disparity in terms of Controlled Parking Zones (CPZ) locations across the borough. It was also felt additional consideration would need to be given to the types of housing provision in affected areas where some properties had access to private and street parking and others may only have access to street parking. In further discussion the Committee highlighted the importance of undertaking a broader conversation with Transport for London (TfL) regarding active travel routes and to consider how any parking and transport considerations co-incided with Brent's commitment to the tackling the climate emergency.
- The Committee heard that active discussions were underway with Cabinet members and officers regarding active travel and recreation, with a focus on ensuring that the spaces available in Brent were used to their maximum effect, particularly considering the increased number of school streets in the borough.

- The Committee queried how much consideration had been given to increasing the level of insourcing Council services, as part of the approach towards mitigating against the impact of the funding cuts from central government, and also ensuring that residents continued to receive quality services. In response the Committee were advised that it was Council policy to consider insourcing as an option when contracts were due for re-procurement, as had been demonstrated within the approach and model adopted under the Redefining Local Services programme. Whilst keen to increase the level of insourcing, the approach had required a pragmatic approach recognising the issues to be addressed in terms of staffing and overall cost viability for each contract and service.
- The Committee queried the time frame of setting the budget as it was felt that the time constraints limited the depth of the scrutiny and consultation that could take place, as such it was felt that a longer timescale starting earlier would benefit the process. Minesh Patel, Corporate Director of Finance and Resources advised that historically local government funding had been provided on the basis of a 3 year funding settlement by the Government, which had provided more certainty and allowed more time to plan, consult and scrutinise the budget plans. More recently however, the government had moved to providing only a single year settlement which had resulted in further challenges in terms of budget planning as well as managing the continued reductions in funding.
- The Committee asked how much knowledge sharing with other Council's happened during the budget setting process, Committee members queried if increased knowledge sharing could provide an opportunity to link up with neighbouring boroughs to cut costs and maximise funding. In response the Committee were advised that when the budget was formed if any funding gaps were identified this information would be cascaded down to affected departments for them to explore where they could make savings. Discussions at departmental level could then include review with counterparts in other local authorities in terms of best practice and in order to explore what other options could be practical. The Committee were also advised that Councillor Mili Patel (as the Cabinet Member for Finance, Resources & Reform) regularly met with other finance leads across London including the GLA to ensure that, as a Council, Brent were up to date with best practice and opportunities to maximise budgets.
- In relation to the points highlighted regarding single year funding allocations, the Committee were advised that one of the recommendations made by the Task Group was to lobby for reform of local government finances to support a revised and more effective funding schedule moving forward.
- The Committee discussed Recommendation 5, Additional Advice & Support for our Community & Voluntary Sector (CVS) Partners, which had included the proposal that in order to support the CVS in continuing to provide local support services, consideration should be given where possible to providing community space at peppercorn rent. Upon further discussion, the Committee heard that the focus was initially on supporting the positive work undertaken by CVS groups in Brent, recognising that CVS groups provided services where the Council were not always able to, and it was therefore felt exploring the availability of space that could be made available to CVS groups was an important way forward in supporting their sustainability.

- Additionally, it was felt that the Committee required clearer evidence of how the monitoring of grants to CVS groups was reviewed and evaluated to be able to clearly assess the impact of the funding that had been provided.
- The Committee discussed the proposed increase in Council Tax that was due to be recommended for approval as part of the Council's budget setting report in February 2023. In view of concerns raised relating to the impact of the proposal, the Committee sought assurances that in light of the proposed increase there would also be increased funding made available to the Resident Support Fund and Council Tax Support Scheme to continue supporting the most vulnerable residents where necessary and if further exploration had taken place with regard to extending universal free school meals. The Committee were advised that due to the reduced level of central government funding the Council had been left with no choice but to increase Council Tax in order to maintain effective essential services to residents and achieve a balanced budget. The Committee were re-assured that the Council continued to place a high priority on ensuring that the borough's most vulnerable residents were supported, with qualifying residents able to access the Council Tax Support Scheme and Resident Support Fund. Additionally, the issue of food poverty remained a top priority with work being undertaken by the dedicated Food Justice Champion, Councillor Ryan Hack alongside Brent Schools to support identifying the most effective ways that the Council could continue to provide support in this area.
- The Committee queried if there were any other avenues to explore in terms of how Council Tax was calculated, in order to reduce the financial impact felt by residents. The Committee were advised that as part of this process the Task Group had been keen to explore and extend the range of income generation opportunities and to lobby for reform of the local government funding system, recognising the regressive nature of Council Tax and in order to seek a more progressive tax system with the, Committee also in agreement that central government should be responsible for ensuring that local authorities were adequately funded.
- The Committee queried how the Council would cope with potentially increased applications to the Resident Support Fund, in light of the increased Council Tax pressures coupled with the ongoing Cost of Living crisis. In response to the issue raised Tom Cattermole, Director of Customer Access, confirmed that the service was adequately prepared to manage increased applications, it was noted there was currently an approximate 4 week wait for applications to be processed.
- The Committee queried how the disparity between the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) increases against CPI would impact the acquisition of future housing assets and the maintenance of current housing stock. It was confirmed that the lower rent increases would affect the generation of income from rent which in turn would impact upon the Council's ability to purchase additional housing stock and make the improvements to current housing stock to support maximum energy efficiency in line with Brent's climate ambition. It was confirmed that an HRA Assets report would be going to cabinet to provide further details.
- The Committee highlighted the need to ensure that the collaborative planning responsibilities and financial contributions between the NHS Trust and the Council to improve the Health and Social Care function in Brent were evenly shared, particularly regarding the issue of hospital discharge. In response the

Committee heard that most of the funding to support hospital discharges this Winter had been given to Local Authorities to manage and support discharge in to care homes. It was felt that there was good collaborative work between Brent and its health partners who shared a collective focus on building a safe system and providing effective care support packages to residents upon hospital discharge.

In summarising the discussion, the Chair extended the Committee's gratitude to all the officers responsible for producing the budget, particularly within the context of the challenging financial environment. Further thanks were also extended to Budget Scrutiny Task Group members and stakeholders for their contributions throughout the budget scrutiny process. The Committee felt that the collaborative work from all parties had resulted in the best possible outcome for residents despite the challenging budget constraints. The Committee were further advised that throughout the Budget Scrutiny Task Group consultation process further active feedback had been shared with officers so that suggested improvements could be considered without having to wait for the report publication.

As no further issues were raised the Chair then drew the item to a close and the Committee **RESOLVED** to approve the findings and recommendations made by the Budget Scrutiny Task Group ahead of them being submitted to Cabinet and Full Council as part of the budget setting process.

The following information requested was raised to take forward:

- (i) The Corporate Director of Finance and Resources to confirm when the HRA Assets Report would be going to Cabinet.

## **7. Scrutiny Work Plan 2022/23 Update**

The Committee were then invited to consider and review the scrutiny work programme for the remainder of 2023-24.

The Chair confirmed that there had been some rescheduling of agenda items as listed in the report and it was NOTED that an additional item on the Cost of Living crisis was due to be heard at the April 2023 meeting.

## **8. Scrutiny Progress Update - Recommendations Tracker**

The Committee was then invited to consider the progress and updates provided in relation to the Resources & Public Realm scrutiny recommendation and information request tracker.

The Chair invited Committee members to ask officers questions relating to the progress of the previous recommendations, suggestions, and information requests made by the Committee as detailed in Appendix A of the report.

The following queries were raised by the Committee:

- In relation to the Committee recommendation to “Use 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 required assurances that this was being actively explored, particularly with regard to discharge care packages that included support for patients who required financial support to keep the cost of vital medical equipment running at home. Officers confirmed that a full response would be included ahead of the next Resources and Public Realm Scrutiny Committee in February 2023.
- In terms of the suggestion made to the Brent Council Grants Programme, to “Ensure monies distributed as part of the Carbon Offset Fund are targeted to communities/areas in most need” the Committee clarified that they felt it should state that the funding should be used in the areas of the highest emissions in order to maximise impact of the carbon offset fund in reducing emissions.
- In relation to the point on the Draft Borough Plan 2023-27 to “Involve the worker community (i.e trade unions) in the consultation/engagement process”, the Committee welcomed the response that this had been undertaken, however it was felt that this had not been strongly reflected in the written report. In response the Committee were advised that when the report was finalised for adoption by Full Council details of the engagement undertaken with the Trade Unions would be clearly reflected.
- In further discussion members considered the benefits of broadening the range of Trade Unions engaged as part of future consultation processes to align with the number of business consultees. The Committee were advised that any suggestions to significantly increase the range of Trade Unions would require consideration and review through the Council’s Executive arrangements.
- In relation to the suggestion on the Safer Brent Annual Report 2021/22 to “Reinstate a health representative on the Safer Brent Partnership Board” it was confirmed that the Chief Executive would write to NHS partners to prompt increased attendance from health partners at meetings.
- In relation to the recommendations made regarding the Redefining Local Services Integrated Street Cleansing, Waste Collections and Winter Maintenance Services Contract Procurement, agreed by Cabinet on 16 January 2023, the Committee felt that it was important to re-emphasise the recommendation that where possible recycling sacks were replaced with wheelie bins and sought some assurance that this was being actively looked in to. Carolyn Downs, Chief Executive, confirmed that the cabinet report had been amended following the feedback from the Resources and Public Realm Scrutiny Committee with active discussions underway with Veolia to explore this further. As per the recommendations tracker the Committee re-iterated that they required a written update report by 10 February 2023 to update the Committee on the progress made. The Committee felt it would be helpful for Councillor Krupa Sheth, Cabinet Member for Environment, Infrastructure and Climate Action to attend the 22 February 2023 Resources and Public Realm Scrutiny Committee meeting to respond to any further queries following the Committee’s receipt of the update. Moving forward the Committee reiterated that they would continue to monitor the implementation of the contract, with the Committee keen to invite the contractors to a future meeting in order to

- review service provision and performance in relation to the new contract arrangements.
- In response to a query regarding the functions and implementation of the Financial Inclusion Dashboard, Tom Cattermole, Director of Customer Access advised the Committee that a video had been produced to be shared with members that illustrated the range of services that the dashboard encompassed.
  - In relation to Brent Council's Grants Programmes the Committee required an update on the progress of the information request, seeking a feasibility report that investigated different options for voting on 'You Decide' decision days to increase accessibility. Lorna Hughes, Director of Communities, clarified that an internal audit review had taken place, with the findings of this currently being worked through with a view to collating a management response. The Committee were advised that upon completion a report would be provided to the Committee and Cabinet.
  - The Committee queried the level of engagement from the Disability Forum in terms of the consultation on the Borough Plan, with members advised that the Forum had been actively involved in the consultation process. Given the issues raised, however, it was agreed that further clarification would be provided on the membership and operation of the Forum
  - Councillor J. Patel extended his thanks to Lorna Hughes and her team for the progress made in providing the NCIL funding to projects in Kingsbury and Queensbury, he felt the process had been straightforward and the residents were able to quickly realise the benefits of the funding provided.

Councillor Conneely thanked members and officers for contributing to the Recommendations Tracker Update before summarising the additional actions and information requests following the updates provided, which were NOTED as follows:

- Information request for Lorna Hughes to confirm the mechanism to become a member of the Disability Forum and to confirm the number of participants on the last Disability Forum that were consulted on the Borough Plan.
- For Councillor Krupa Sheth to attend the next RPR Scrutiny meeting when the revised RLS monitoring was discussed.
- When the Borough Plan report goes to Full Council for approval, the report should include the information regarding consultation with Trade Unions.

## **9. Any Other Urgent Business**

None.

Date of the next meeting: Wednesday 22 February 2023

The meeting closed at 7:45pm.

Councillor Conneely  
Chair