



Brent

MINUTES OF THE RESOURCES AND PUBLIC REALM SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
Held in the Conference Hall, Brent Civic Centre on Tuesday 7 November 2023
at 6.00 pm

PRESENT: Councillor Conneely (Chair), Councillor Long (Vice-Chair) and Councillors Aden, Ahmadi Moghaddam, Akram, S Butt, Georgiou, Molloy and J Patel.

Also Present: Councillor M Butt (Leader of the Council), Councillor Tatler, Deputy Leader, Cabinet Member for Finance, Resources & Reform and Cabinet Member for Regeneration, Planning & Growth and Councillor Ketan Sheth, Chair of the Community & Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee.

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

Apologies were received from Councillors Mitchell, Miller and Shah. Councillor Molloy attended as an alternate member on behalf of Councillor Shah.

2. **Declarations of interests**

Councillor S Butt declared an interest as one of the directors of First Wave and I4B Housing.

3. **Order of Business**

The Chair agreed to vary the order of business on the agenda to allow the Scrutiny Progress Update – Recommendations Tracker to be considered first. The minutes therefore reflect the order in which the items were dealt with at the meeting.

4. **Minutes of the previous meeting**

It was **RESOLVED** that the minutes of the previous meeting held on Wednesday 6 September 2023 be approved as a correct record.

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

None.

6. **Scrutiny Progress Update - Recommendations Tracker**

The Chair advised that all responses on the tracker were up to date, however raised one query in relation to a previous Committee request to receive a cumulative equality impact assessment spanning the previous 5 years to understand the impact of budget cuts on services to residents, that had since been deemed unfeasible. Councillor Tatler, Deputy Leader, Cabinet Member for Finance, Resources & Reform and Cabinet Member for Regeneration, Planning & Growth advised that the reason the recommendation was no longer feasible was due to reduced staffing and resourcing since the original recommendation had been agreed. The Committee was advised that the recommendation would be kept under review and if capacity increased efforts would be made to deliver the request.

7. **Annual Complaints Report 2022-23**

Councillor Tatler introduced the report that provided the Committee with a breakdown of complaints received and the Annual Complaints report as approved by Cabinet on 16 October 2023 that detailed complaints performance for the period 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023, with a focus on the nature of complaints and the learning gained to support informing Brent 's future approach to service improvements.

The following key points were discussed:

- The Committee queried the effectiveness of the comms strategy in relation to how residents were informed of the different ways that a complaint could be made. In response the Committee was advised that residents could find information on how to make a complaint via the Brent website, options included using the dedicated complaints phone line or registering a complaint via the portal on the website, additionally residents who came to the Civic Centre could be supported by the Customer Services team to make a complaint.
- Officers agreed that steps could be taken to share the dedicated complaints line telephone number more clearly on the website and also to utilise the 'Your Brent' magazine to promote the complaints procedure.
- The Committee questioned if adequate efforts had been made to resolve residents' concerns at an early stage so that issues did not escalate to a formal complaint. Officers advised that it was a key priority of the Council to effectively manage residents' concerns and seek resolution before it reached the stage of a formal complaint, it was noted that in some areas of the Council service requests were regularly utilised by residents more than complaints.
- Following a Committee query in relation to the quality of the responses provided to residents, the Committee was advised that resident satisfaction was measured by how many complaints required further escalation. The Complaints Team were in the process of completing some focused work in relation to the quality of responses provided in order to identify training points that could be used to support training for officers in managing complaints more effectively to increase resident satisfaction; this included bespoke departmental training and checklist criteria to ensure comprehensive responses were provided.
- The Committee heard that patterns of complaints were looked at to identify particular themes that required attention, the learning achieved from this was used to inform service improvements moving forward.
- The Committee felt that where service improvements had been made as a result of residents' dialogue with the Council, it would be positive to promote this to residents to demonstrate the Council's desire to actively work with residents to improve service delivery.
- It was clarified that complaints in relation to commissioned services were treated with the same level of response by officers within their remit who would liaise with the commissioned services to seek a resolution.
- It was confirmed that the Annual Complaints report was published in full on the Brent website, the Committee felt it would be helpful to also publish a shorter user-friendly version of the report that listed key areas of concern.

- The Committee noted that over the years of austerity inflicted on local government, it was inevitable that service delivery would be affected and lead to increased resident complaints, despite the difficulties in managing increasingly reduced budgets the Committee was assured that the Council remained committed to delivering high quality services within the context of the difficult financial circumstances.
- The Committee was advised that equality data feedback received so far had not indicated any specific groups of particular concerns, however it was noted that not all complainants completed the form as it was not mandatory.
- In terms of inclusivity, it was felt that the different mechanisms to make a complaint were sufficient to support all residents, examples shared that demonstrated inclusivity were that digitally excluded residents could make a complaint over the phone or come in to the Civic Centre to receive support, visually impaired residents could receive communication in bigger print or on different coloured paper, translation services and an advocacy service were available and support could also be provided to residents from their local Ward Councillors.
- The Committee queried the disparity in relation to why some cases were considered if they were reported after a 12 month period, whereas others were rejected on this basis. In response the Committee was advised that they were required to work in accordance with the Social Care and Housing Ombudsman; whereby many cases that extended beyond 12 months would be difficult to thoroughly investigate; it was noted that there were exceptions to the rule and discretion was exercised where appropriate.
- The Committee felt it would be useful to understand any trends in compensation awarded and requested that this information was provided to the Committee at a future date. This was agreed to be taken forward as an information request.
- The Committee noted that Adult Social Care (ASC) were recognised as providing good practice in relation to complaints, however there was an identified theme that required improvement in terms of communication. Claudia Brown, Director of Adult Social Care advised that this was being responded to by increasing communication across teams and colleagues within ASC as well as providing increased communication with service users. Template letters had been developed advising service users of next steps and what to expect once a complaint had been made. The ASC team were committed to providing an improved standardised approach when responding to complaints ensuring clear communication was championed throughout the process.
- The Committee noted that ASC service improvements introduced as a result of service user feedback included the revised template letters for service users that they would receive following a complaint and additional staff training in specifically identified areas of development.
- Following a Committee query in relation to the increased number of Social Care Ombudsman complaints, the Committee was advised that this could be attributed to by the large staff turnover, due to high numbers of agency staff who were not carrying out their duties to the required Brent standards. This had been addressed with agreed steps to increase permanent staff recruitment with a number of measures agreed recently at General Purposes Committee that would see an increased permanent staff team to deliver the high standards of service delivery expected in Brent.

- In terms of Children & Young People (CYP) complaints the Committee queried the increase seen in Looked After Children (LAC) complaints. The Committee was advised that the increase demonstrated that care leavers were confident in advocating for themselves which was felt to be a positive reflection of the strength in Brent's advocacy services, it was noted that the complaints were largely around the quality of semi-independent accommodation and the quality of the support received from care leaver's personal advisers. There had been a number of vacancies for personal advisors, following a recruitment exercise the majority of these had been filled and CYP were expecting to see fewer complaints this year.
- The Committee queried what was changing in CYP to reduce complaints and improve service delivery. In response the Committee was advised that similarly to ASC, measures had also been agreed to support the retention of permanent staff as well as communication training being provided to staff to support positive communication with parents/carers, particularly in relation to not getting drawn in to parental conflict.

In closing the discussion, the Chair thanked officers and Committee Members for their contributions towards the scrutiny on the items before summarising the outcomes of the discussions and additional actions, which were **AGREED** as follows:

Suggestions for Improvement

- (1) A user friendly, summarised version of the Annual Complaints Report to be published alongside the full version on the Brent Council website.
- (2) Publicise and promote service improvements made as a result of upheld complaints.
- (3) Improve the publicity and accessibility of the complaints procedure, including promoting the complaints procedure more regularly in 'Your Brent', and adding the customer service telephone number to the 'How to make a complaint' section of the Council website.
- (4) Liaise with other local authorities to share best practice to reduce the amount of ASC cases being referred to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO).

Information Requests

- (1) Provide a breakdown on compensation paid out during the period of 2020-2023 (broken down by issue type and department).
- (2) Out of the 56% of Stage 2 housing department complaints upheld, provide further detail on how many of these complaints were not upheld at Stage 1.

8. Q2 Financial Report

Councillor Tatler, Deputy Leader, Cabinet Member for Finance, Resources & Reform and Cabinet Member for Regeneration, Planning & Growth introduced the report that set out the financial forecast for the General Fund revenue budget, the Housing Revenue Account, the Dedicated Schools Grant and the Capital Programme, as at Quarter 2 2023/24. Members were asked to note that the report was considered and approved by Cabinet on 16 October 2023.

In noting the particularly challenging financial circumstances the Council were in due to the national economic climate and limited funding from central government it was recognised that Brent's financial challenges were not unique and were in line with other Councils.

The following key points were discussed:

- It was confirmed that measures were in place to mitigate the £13m pressures as a result of temporary accommodation costs, however these measures were unlikely to have an impact until 24/25.
- The Committee queried if increased overspending was anticipated in the future, given the economic climate. In response the Committee was advised that despite the Council's prudent approach, the challenges in continued reduced piecemeal funding from central government and the pressures from statutory demand led services such as Housing, CYP and ASC could lead to Brent and many other councils incurring overspends in order to deliver essential services to residents.
- The Committee was assured that the Council held a healthy reserve fund at present, some of which would need to be used to support the temporary accommodation issues. If it was necessary to withdraw further funds to support other financially challenged areas of the Council, steps would be taken to action this, however this action would not be taken without thorough consideration as any withdrawal from reserve funding would have to be paid back and this would impact budgets across other council services.
- It was noted that some reserves were ringfenced for specific purposes and could not be used for broader purposes.
- The Committee queried if the Council could generate increased revenue via business rates and collecting increased council tax on vacant properties. In response the Committee was advised that the Council was bound by central government legislation, so were unable to change collection rates. The Committee was informed that central government were due to review business rates and consider the devolution of business rates to councils; if Council's were given the authority to manage this, Brent could explore increased business rates to generate more income, however this was not currently an option.
- Officers recognised there were a number of vacant homes in the borough and continued to explore ways to bring these vacant homes back in to use to support temporary accommodation as well as generating Council income. The identification of vacant homes was supported by public intelligence, Ward Councillors and the empty homes property team who went out into the community to identify vacant properties.
- The Committee felt it would be advantageous to reactivate a previously successful campaign to report vacant homes in the borough that the Council had promoted through the 'Your Brent' magazine.
- Work was being actively undertaken to ensure that the correct level of Council Tax was being collected, with officers investigating single person discount claims and converted properties.
- The Committee was advised that there may be a change in legislation that could support increased income generation through the collection of Council tax on vacant properties as the change would allow the Council to collect

double the amount of council tax on vacant properties after 1 year as opposed to the current 2 year rule.

- In terms of generating income through commercialisation opportunities, the Committee was advised that the Council were often approached with commercial opportunities, however it was felt these often posed unnecessary financial risk to the Council. The Committee noted examples of other Council's that had tried this method of income generation with results being highly unfavourable to the Council's finances.
- To limit the cost pressures associated with the demand for temporary accommodation, the Committee queried what was being done to bring voids within Brent Housing's portfolio in to use more quickly. In response the Committee was advised that improvements had been made to procedures within the voids system, this had resulted in improved void turnaround times.
- It was hoped that the Mayor's Refugee Housing Programmes would support the Council in purchasing larger family sized homes for use in the borough that would in turn support a reduction in the excessive temporary accommodation costs.
- The Committee was advised that when viability and market conditions improved, further acquisitions would be made to Brent's Housing portfolio to source additional temporary accommodation.
- Following a Committee query in relation to the broader mitigations in places to manage the overspend, the Committee was advised that the Finance Team rigorously monitored the budget, looking for trends in demands to support future projections, however it was noted that there was an element of unpredictability in demand led areas of the budget.
- In addition to projections and financial modelling undertaken, service area managers were robustly challenged to ensure their services were providing the best value for money and continued to explore the most efficient ways to deliver services.

At this stage in proceedings, the Committee agreed to apply the guillotine procedure under Standing Order 62(c) in order to extend the meeting for a period of 15 minutes and enable the remaining business on the agenda to be completed.

- In recognition that the significant overspend in the current budget was not in relation to the typical areas of overspend (ASC and CYP) the Committee queried if this had caused additional pressure on budget holders in these areas to limit their costs, taking in to consideration the already projected overspend. In response Nigel Chapman, Corporate Director, Children & Young People advised that he felt he received an appropriate level of challenge and support to manage the CYP budget. Conscientious efforts continued to be made to manage risk within the community rather than bringing children in to care unnecessarily, however it was highlighted that it would only take a small number of emergency care or high cost residential placements to significantly impact the budget.
- CYP also continued to experience financial pressures in relation to EHCP funding, however this was actively being managed through the support of the Delivering Better Value in SEND (DBV) Programme, with some traction starting to take place.

In closing the discussion, the Chair thanked officers and Committee Members for their contributions towards the scrutiny on the items before summarising the outcomes of the discussions and additional actions, which were **AGREED** as follows:

Recommendations to Cabinet

- (1) Continue to lobby central government to establish a locally controlled business rates system in order for local authorities to influence policy around the setting of Business Rates and to generate additional income.

Suggestions for Improvement

- (1) Explore new ways to increase collection rates for Business Rates, learning lessons from other local authorities.
- (2) Liaise with the Office for National Statistics (ONS) to explore whether further census data could be provided to the Council on the specific properties in the borough identified as 'unoccupied dwellings'.
- (3) Undertake a communications and engagement campaign to encourage owners to rent vacant properties to the Council to address the shortage in temporary accommodation supply.

9. Scrutiny Work Programme 23/24

The Committee noted there were no changes to the work plan since the last Committee meeting. The Committee noted that it was a live document and in addition to the agreed items, additional items may be added as and when necessary, when brought to the Committee's attention.

10. Any other urgent business

None.

Date of the next meeting: Wednesday 24 January 2024

The meeting closed at 9.17pm

COUNCILLOR RITA CONNEELY
Chair