



Brent

MINUTES OF THE COMMUNITY AND WELLBEING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
Wednesday 20 November 2024 at 6.00 pm
Held as a hybrid meeting in the Conference Hall – Brent Civic Centre

PRESENT: Councillor Ketan Sheth (Chair), and Councillors Fraser, Aden, Afzal, Benea, Ethapemi, Mistry, Rajan-Seelan and Smith, and co-opted members Ms Rachelle Goldberg, Archdeacon Catherine Pickford and Mr Alloysius Frederick

In attendance: Councillor Muhammed Butt

1. Apologies for absence and clarification of alternate members

- Councillor Mahmood
- Alice Lester
- Kim Wright
- Councillor Aden apologies for lateness

2. Declarations of interests

There were no declarations of interest.

Councillor Sheth highlighted that his register of interest could be found on the Brent website.

3. Deputations (if any)

There were no deputations received.

4. Minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 18 September 2024 were approved as an accurate record of the meeting.

5. Matters arising (if any)

There were no matters arising.

6. i4B and First Wave Housing Performance Update

The Chair welcomed Andrew Hudson, Chair of i4B and FWH Housing Companies, to the meeting and invited him to introduce the report.

In introducing the report, Andrew Hudson drew the Committee's attention to the 3 key areas he felt the Companies had made progress and the 3 key areas he felt the Companies needed to improve. The Companies were pleased with the progress of acquisitions within i4B, where the Company had surpassed the target of 25 for the year with 30 acquisitions completed and a further 10 properties in the pipeline. Emergency repairs were also being completed 100% within the target time and there had been progress in relation to compliance, particularly the monitoring of health and safety

compliance through True Compliance and the delivery of gas and legionella inspections. He assured the Committee that acknowledging the good performance did not indicate complacency regarding the importance of robust compliance, and it was recognised that there was a need to improve the completion rate of EICRs. In terms of areas for improvement, he highlighted tenant satisfaction where i4B and FWH had low satisfaction rates. The Companies would be looking into the reasons driving that satisfaction level. Voids were highlighted as another area for improvement in terms of the turnaround times to complete a void and let the property. The Companies had done a deep dive into the reasons for the long turnaround times and set out some actions to address that. The final area of focus for improvement was rent collection. One particular pattern emerging was issues with the interaction between Universal Credit and changes in rent levels, and since that was an issue that would happen every year the Companies were looking to build better relationships with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to address.

Councillor Butt (As Leader and Cabinet Member for Housing, Regeneration, Planning and Growth) added that the role of the Companies was to support the Council in securing accommodation to provide homes to the residents of Brent, and they had done a good job in procuring those properties but there were many factors which impacted the Companies ability to do that and therefore he thanked the Committee for inviting officers to speak about those challenges.

The Chair thanked presenters for their introduction and invited comments and questions from the Committee, with the following issues raised:

In noting that an area the Companies wished to improve was voids performance, members highlighted that there had been poor performance in void turnaround times for some time, and asked why measures that had been put in place to date had not seen an overall improvement in performance. Andrew Hudson agreed that voids had been a challenge for a while and the deep dive had aimed to take a comprehensive view to put in place an action plan to mitigate those difficulties. During the voids deep dive, officers and Board members had reviewed the voids process from start to finish, from the moment an existing property was declared void, through to the tenant moving out, the new tenant/s moving in, and the series of actions that needed to take place between that involving many different stakeholders such as Brent Housing Management (BHM), surveyors, contractors and sub-contractors. It was highlighted that some void properties may only require a deep clean, but others may require more complex works such as a roof repair, and in any one of the void stages there could be delays. Officers were now looking to address all the different stages, including the alerting of the contractor that a specification was needed, the handing over of keys, the checking of gas/ water/ electric meters, and the nomination of tenants, and, as far as possible, do those actions in parallel rather than in series, with much fewer gaps between each stage, so that the process became quicker and smoother. A lot of that work depended on the interaction between different parts of the Council and external contractors and that was also an area that would be improved going forward. As a result of the deep dive, he was optimistic that the main factors needing to be addressed had been tackled and that the right people would take the right actions forward, but he was conscious that the officers who were required to do this work were very busy and the Companies were not in a position to put further resource in.

Noting the positive performance on acquisitions, the Committee asked how good the Companies were in embedding themselves into conversations with developers, post planning approval, to maximise the number of units at discounted rates that could be acquired. Andrew Hudson confirmed that the Companies stood ready to use their distinctive structures to take on particular opportunities and projects and apply for grants where the Council could not. Those interactions were managed by Council officers. Hal Chavasse (Strategy and Delivery Manager, Brent Council) highlighted that the involvement in those conversations had improved over the last 6 months following an internal

restructure that allowed officers to attend the Affordable Housing Supply Board on behalf of the Companies. This was a monthly meeting that discussed new developments, regeneration schemes and internal developments which i4B and FWH were now included in. For example, a Section 106 acquisition which might not work for the Council could work for i4B who could charge different rent levels, and FWH could benefit from grants as a registered provider, so there were some specific opportunities available to the Companies that the Council itself might not necessarily be able to progress. Where units with larger blocks became available to the Companies, this required the Company to draw down loan funding from the Council. Where those opportunities presented, they would be checked against set parameters to ensure they did not put the Companies in financial jeopardy, and then the Company would have a conversation with the Council about drawing down loan funding to buy those units. There were 2 schemes that the Companies were in conversations regarding currently. In response to what type of housing i4B acquired, the Committee were advised that i4B did not develop housing but only acquired it. The Company had mostly bought single units with a mix of on-street properties and within blocks, meaning many of them were leasehold. Generally, the Company did not buy in large developer units but had recently acquired a 9 unit block from a private developer and had Lexington, the key worker block with 153 units. In total there were approximately 600 units in i4B.

In response to whether i4B would look to increase its acquisition target for the following year as a result of the good performance, Peter Gadsdon (Corporate Director Partnerships, Housing and Residents Services, Brent Council) advised that the majority of acquisitions were houses and flats on the open market which the Council's Property Team found and acquired on behalf of the Companies. The Companies would need to draw down loan funding from the Council to purchase more properties, and as such would need to evaluate doing that against parameters to ensure the Company remained financially viable. He was able to offer assurance that the Companies were being ambitious within the resources they had.

The Committee noted that the report had identified challenges where the Company owned a property but a third-party freeholder owned the building and asked how the Companies were engaging proactively with the owners of buildings to ensure complaints and concerns were being addressed. Andrew Hudson highlighted that, going forward, the Companies were looking to avoid units where the freeholder was not another local authority or Housing Association. Hal Chavasse highlighted that it was much easier to engage with freeholders when they were another Council or Housing Association to get issues the freeholder was responsible for resolved relatively quickly. There were challenges if the unit was in a building owned by a private freeholder where the Company may only have an address with no phone number or email address on record. Letters were sent by the Companies to those freeholders proactively to help understand any major works they may be planning and obtain Fire Risk Assessments but the response rates were usually very low. Where there were issues at properties in those buildings, such as a roof leak, then the Company would follow the legal process which would result in the Companies effectively being able to go in and complete the works.

The Chair then invited representatives from Brent Youth Parliament (BYP) to contribute to the discussion. BYP highlighted that, whilst i4B had acquired 30 properties over the year, there were many more families presenting as homeless at the Civic Centre every week, and asked what the Companies were doing to alleviate homelessness so that children and young people could continue to go to school in their local area. Councillor Butt acknowledged the challenge and highlighted the difficulties in finding available properties and landlords who were willing to give the Council or Companies their properties. A lot of people attending the Civic Centre were also on benefits which were capped, meaning the opportunity for them to compete with market rents was even harder, and where the rents were higher than the Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rate then the Council and Companies

were required to work with families to ensure they understood the implications that they would have to make up that difference in rent, also taking into account their utility bills, Council tax, food, fuel and clothing. He reassured BYP and the Committee that the Housing Needs Team, led by Laurence Coaker (Director of Housing Needs and Support), worked very hard to support residents in Brent to get into accommodation, and the Companies and Council were working with everyone they could in order to secure and procure as many properties as possible within the challenging market environment.

The Committee noted that performance appeared to be similar to the previous year, and asked the Chair what had changed since the previous year in his view and what the Committee could look forward to seeing in the future. In response, Andrew Hudson advised that there was a Council-wide exercise to improve communications with tenants which the Companies would be taking part in to understand what was driving the low levels of satisfaction seen in the most recent Tenant Satisfaction Measures (TSMs), resulting in an action plan to address that. The Companies were looking to speed up voids and would review progress in early 2025. Finally, the Companies wanted to improve rent collection and were looking to establish closer links with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) by Spring 2025 to ensure officers and tenants were prepared for amending Universal Credit claims when rents increased. To improve performance, a third Tenancy Services Manager was being recruited so that the Companies had more people working directly with tenants and one of their responsibilities would be to improve rent collection.

In terms of housing management performance, the Committee asked Councillor Butt, as the Interim Cabinet Member for Housing, whether he was satisfied with the progress and management of performance and that the measures being taken would improve the performance long-term. Councillor Butt responded that when there were delays or complaints and customers were not getting the service they needed and deserved then he viewed that as a failure and he would not be satisfied in those circumstances. After reviewing the performance data and complaints, he was now ensuring that officers knew where the issues lay, and this could be discussed more in-depth in the next agenda item related solely to housing management performance in terms of what was being put in place to tackle those performance issues. He added that he took that view that when tenants raised their concerns it should be viewed as a positive because it highlighted issues that could then be addressed to improve the delivery of services.

The Committee highlighted that levels of satisfaction from the TSMs were relatively low, particularly regarding safety and complaints handling. They asked what strategy would be used to improve those figures and how the tenants were engaged. Peter Gadsdon explained that tenants had been engaged through a mixture of face-to-face questionnaires and postal surveys, following the guidance from the regulator. Spencer Randolph (Head of Housing Services, Brent Council) explained that FWH and i4B would mirror what the Council did to address tenant satisfaction. He highlighted that, traditionally, the Council had been using transactional surveys to understand resident satisfaction, and for transactional surveys on repairs there was more than 80% satisfaction. The Tenant Satisfaction Measures (TSMs) were more perception based and looked at how the Council and Companies were performing overall with regard to the management of properties and tenancies, and the satisfaction levels from those surveys were low. It was thought this was due to a lack of engagement and communication with residents, and there was a comprehensive improvement plan that had been developed over the past 5 months to address the issues, including a Council-wide project addressing complaints handling. This was the first year TSMs had been run and the questions were prescribed by the Regulator for Social Housing. As such, officers were not able to make comparisons on perception from previous years, but going forward there would be benchmarking information across all prescribed questions.

Noting the low TSM results regarding Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB), Brent Youth Parliament asked what methods were being utilised to ensure ASB was dealt with in the most effective way to ensure young people were kept safe in their homes, and whether the views of young people had been obtained in the TSM surveys. Kate Daine (Head of Housing and Neighbourhoods, Brent Council) confirmed that young people had not been surveyed as part of TSMs but it was recognised that they would form part of the families responding. The Companies had surveyed the tenants prescribed by government. In relation to ASB, she highlighted it was very difficult to deal appropriately with ASB across the borough, and across London, but it had been recognised that the perception of tenants was that the Council and Companies were not dealing with ASB well enough. Part of the reason behind that result would be because ASB meant different things to different people, but she assured BYP that officers did as much as possible to address ASB.

The Committee asked how the Companies addressed the wellbeing of tenant. Peter Gadsdon highlighted tenant satisfaction was primarily used to understand the feelings and wellbeing of tenants, and work was being done to further understand those satisfaction levels. Another way the Companies and Council understood the wellbeing of tenants was if they were in arrears. The Companies deployed Tenancy Sustainment Officers to visit those tenants to talk about their issues and provide holistic support to help the tenants maintain their tenancy. There was also a contract with a provider called BEAM who provided holistic employment support for a number of tenants in arrears.

The Committee asked whether the Companies were looking at any other forms of income or bidding for additional income, such as through the GLA. Andrew Hudson responded that the biggest opportunity for funding for local authorities and Housing Associations would lie in how the government addressed future funding for housing and social housing in the budget going forward. He confirmed that the Companies were ready to play their part in whatever opportunities lay in that.

The Chair thanked those present for their contributions and drew the item to a close. He invited members to make recommendations with the following RESOLVED:

- i) At a future meeting, to receive the voids action plan, including reassurance that properties were being looked after in a systematic way before the point they became void, with staff checking property conditions while tenants were in situ. The plan should incorporate value for money.
- ii) At a future meeting, to receive an engagement and communications plan that helps to improve TSMs. The plan should incorporate value for money.
- iii) For future reports, where it was noted that performance targets were not being met, it should be stated what would be done to mitigate that.
- iv) To endorse the approach of avoiding purchasing properties in buildings that were owned by private third-party freeholders that were not local authorities or housing associations.

7. Brent Housing Management Performance Update

Spencer Randolph (Head of Housing Services, Brent Council) introduced the report, which reviewed the performance of Brent Housing Management (BHM) over the past year. Particular attention was brought to the Tenant Satisfaction Measures (TSMs) which formed part of a new regulation that came into force in April 2024 which were standards that all Councils and registered providers were now being held to nationally. The TSMs had been introduced with the aim to hold registered providers to account and make them more professional in the way properties were managed. He highlighted that Brent Council was not performing where it wanted to be in relation to TSMs and that services in general

needed improvement. He added that the housing service had been putting in steps to ensure readiness for when the call for inspection arrived and that services were improved and residents were engaged going forward.

In relation to TSMs, Ryan Collymore (Head of Service – Housing Management Property, Brent Council) added that the intention was to get some qualitative data behind some of the prescribed questions in the next iteration, so that where residents had informed the Council they were not satisfied then officers could understand the reasons behind that. This was thought to be useful because, with perception-based surveys, the question might be understood differently by the tenant compared to what it truly asked. For example, when asked 'how satisfied are you with complaints handling', to a resident they could be answering based on their experience of calling to report a repair rather than relating to a formal complaint they had made. I4B had very good compliance, but the TSM results relating to safety and quality were low, so there was a need to understand why residents had answered in that way. Alongside this would be a big push on communications so that residents knew the good work that had been done.

Councillor Butt (as Leader and Cabinet Member for Housing, Regeneration, Planning and Growth) highlighted that since he had taken on the portfolio for housing it had been a good learning experience, and he understood the need for scrutiny on the satisfaction and repairs figures. There were also concerns relating to staffing that were being addressed to help performance improve.

The Chair thanked presenters for their introduction and invited comments and questions from the Committee, with the following issues raised:

Noting the mismatch between performance and customer satisfaction, and the fact that officers had attributed the low satisfaction to lack of communication and engagement, the Committee asked what could be put down to services not being delivered compared to services and improvements not being communicated. Spencer Randolph highlighted that on a transactional basis, the level of satisfaction after every repair carried out was relatively high at around 80%, opposed to the perception of how the Council was dealing with repairs, complaints and Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) which was low. There were other parts of London with similar disparities, for example Newham had the highest TSM satisfaction rate in London but had been rated the lowest performing borough by the Housing Regulator. The Council had been reviewing this anomaly and looking at how it assessed itself against standards, and had concluded that there had been very little engagement with tenants over the last few years due to staffing issues and resource allocations. As a result, the housing service had now restructured, bringing in 25 patch area tenancy managers (ATMs) who would engage with 350 of their own tenants, managing those tenancies and engaging on a regular basis. Increased communications channels would be created and a reinvigorated tenant newsletter in order to re-engage tenants. The service had also been doing walkabouts around estates with lead members, where tenants had fed back that they don't see or know their Housing Officer (Area Tenancy Manager). The service was currently carrying out TSMs for the next year and did not think enough significant improvement had been made for this to come through in the results, and it would likely be the next set where the impact of the improvements was seen.

Considering paragraph 4.3 of the report, which detailed low customer satisfaction for repairs despite high completion rates for repairs, the Committee asked whether it was the quality of the repair that was causing the low satisfaction. Ryan Collymore advised members that it came down to the perception of the question. The housing service was interested in satisfaction with the repairs service and completion of the repair, but tenants might answer in relation to the phone call they made to the contact centre if they waited a long time to get through to raise the repair. As such, whilst the regulator had prescribed the

survey questions that should be asked, in the next iteration of surveys would be include some supplementary questions to understand the background behind tenant's answers.

The Committee noted that there were 88 empty Council houses currently in the void process and asked whether that was a cause for concern. They were advised that as a proportion of Council stock of just over 8,000 properties 88 void units was relatively low, as there was often regular turnover in Council stock due to people moving or passing away. There had been a significant reduction in the number of void properties compared to the same time the previous year, which had been at 148. There had been significant improvements in void turnaround times over the last year following the implementation of a voids 'hit squad' to streamline the process, but that had plateaued in the last 6 months due to problems pre and post-contractor that needed improvement. In relation to the information received on voids, the Committee highlighted it would be useful for those to be further broken down into types of void and geographical area to identify any particular patterns.

In relation to paragraph 14.3 of the report which stated that the housing service was carrying out an exercise to look at diversity data, the Committee asked what that would entail. Officers explained that the service used a hybrid IT system currently through a mix of MS Dynamics and Northgate/NEC and there was a large amount of data needing to be cleared on those systems. A review was underway to consider solely moving over to the Northgate/NEC product rather than Dynamics where there would be a need to undertake a data cleansing project. Then new Area Tenancy Managers would be conducting more tenancy audits to obtain more tenant data such as vulnerabilities that could be included in the database. In terms of what percentage of tenants the Council already had diversity data on, it was agreed this could be provided outside of the meeting. The service was now aiming to be more robust at the point of let to obtain that information and ensure its accuracy and effective use.

The Committee asked how the Council managed succession rights, for example, when a two person household became one-person. Kate Daine explained that this depended on the age of the person, and other factors which were legislative and covered by the Housing Allocations Policy. Housing tried as much as possible to work holistically with any family who had experienced a death, particularly if it was the lead tenant, to ensure the surviving members of the family had all of the information needed in order to make an application to remain in the property. The Council would support them if they did not have succession rights or could not remain in the property and would look to get them into alternative accommodation.

The Committee noted that there had been an increase in evictions due to rent arrears compared to the previous year, from 2 to 6, and asked if the Council was forecasting that to continue to increase and whether there was a strategy in place to tackle the potential of higher eviction numbers. Kate Daine explained that one reason the eviction numbers had increased was due to the reopening and speeding up of court, following extreme delays processing court applications post-covid. She highlighted that the Council did as much as possible to keep people in their homes and used eviction as a last option and never took evictions lightly. Before an eviction took place a report would be taken to a panel where an agreement was reached on whether to evict that tenant. Each eviction was done on a case-by-case basis and the panel would review all eventualities and ensure the tenant had received a relevant amount of contact and the Council had done as much as possible to engage them. Once it had been agreed that a tenant would be evicted, the housing service worked with Housing Needs to ensure they were aware of the eviction, as well as Adult Social Care and Children's Social Care to ensure any vulnerabilities were taken care of. As much as possible through this process the Council aimed to prevent the revolving door of homelessness when someone was evicted from a Council tenancy, which was the most affordable type of tenure. If the Council continued to see a true increase in evictions which did not plateau then officers would look to put a specific strategy in place to address that. It

was added that some evictions were not due to rent arrears. The Council had become more proactive in dealing with ASB and some high-profile cases recently had resulted in evictions due to tenant's violent behaviour towards other tenants.

The Committee asked how much was done to help tenants to report issues correctly and how much tenants knew what to expect when they reported an issue, particularly those tenants whose first language was not English. Spencer Randolph felt that not enough had been done around that due to the lack of engagement the service had with tenants. Once the new Area Tenancy Managers were in post they would be going out to tenants within their patches, introducing themselves and asking about any issues they needed resolving, and it was hoped then an improvement would be seen. The Area Tenancy Managers would feed back those issues both to action them and to help identify any themes or patterns emerging.

The Chair thanked those present for their contributions and drew the item to a close. He invited members to make recommendations with the following RESOLVED:

- i) To provide information on the impact of the housing management services reorganisation at a future Committee meeting.
- ii) To include health and safety considerations in future reports, particularly relating to cladding and fire safety, as well as climate change targets.

An information request was made during the discussion, recorded as follows:

- i) To provide the number of tenants the Council had diversity data on.

8. Temporary Accommodation and Homeless Prevention Service

Peter Gadsdon (Corporate Director Partnerships, Housing and Residents Services, Brent Council) introduced the report which informed the Committee of the provision and management of Brent Council's Temporary Accommodation and Homeless Prevention Service, including an update on the support for families in the borough who were homeless or at risk of homelessness and the performance of services, demand for services and improved outcomes for service users. In introducing the report, he highlighted the housing crisis that London was in with high demand for housing and the large overspend this was driving in the Council budget. He then introduced Housing Needs colleagues who had attended to answer questions from the Committee – Zorba Emelonye (Service Manager – Housing Options, Brent Council) and Komal Samra (Service Manager – Accommodation Services, Brent Council) and thanked them for the hard work they were doing in the current environment.

Councillor Butt (as Leader and Cabinet Member for Housing, Regeneration, Planning and Growth) expanded on the introduction, highlighting that the housing situation being faced in Brent was something Brent had never seen before and the pressure and demand for housing was unprecedented. The Council had started a 'Find Your Home' scheme emphasising the need for residents to find a property they could afford, which may not be in Brent where were becoming increasingly unaffordable. As a result of the lack of affordable accommodation in Brent and London, the Temporary Accommodation (TA) spend was increasing due to the Council needing to acquire very expensive accommodation. In addition, the chance of a tenant being allocated a Council home was very slim with a very long waiting list. As such, the Council was encouraging people to find a place they could afford in a place they wanted to go, and whilst it was recognised that people preferred to remain in Brent due to their family and local connections, this was becoming more unlikely to be affordable.

The Chair thanked presenters for their introduction and invited comments and questions from the Committee, with the following issues raised:

The Committee praised the hard work of the service in response to the pressures. As local councillors, the expectations of residents were very high and there was a lack of understanding of the emergency situation the Council was in. They confirmed that members would continue to try to get the message out to the public regarding the housing situation.

In relation to the graph under paragraph 4.10 of the report showing the total number of homeless households each year from 2015 – 2024/5, the Committee highlighted that the Council had successfully halved the number of people living in TA between 2015 and 2021, but it had then gradually increased again. They asked what the narrative behind that was and how it compared to other boroughs. Laurence Coaker (Director of Housing Needs, Brent Council) advised that the increase was due to the impact of the covid-19 pandemic. Pre-pandemic the Council had been doing well at reducing TA numbers as a result of a homelessness prevention approach where the service had been able to engage with landlords and negotiate with them to prevent evictions. Pre-pandemic, the Private Rented Sector (PRS) had been functioning effectively and the Council was able to procure approximately 35-40 properties per month for the prevention or discharge of homelessness duty. Post-pandemic, landlords had been exiting the market following the freeze on evictions that had been enforced during lockdown, following the increase in interest and mortgage rates post-pandemic which landlords had been passing on to renters. There were also exits from the market due to the incoming Renters Reform Bill which aimed to put an end to Section 21 no fault evictions. As such, the main factor driving the homelessness figures and obstructing the prevention and relief of homelessness was the contraction of the PRS. In terms of benchmarking with other boroughs, Brent was around mid-table for numbers in TA. Newham had the highest number of residents in TA with over 5,000, compared to Brent's 2,000.

In response to a query regarding eligibility for emergency accommodation, Laurence Coaker explained that eligibility related to an individual's immigration status and was dictated by legislation. Before any family was booked in to emergency bed and breakfast they needed to meet the eligibility criteria. For example, an Asylum Seeker did not have any status in the UK, meaning that under homelessness legislation they were not eligible and the Housing Need service could not accommodate that person, with the Home Office taking responsibility for accommodating Asylum Seekers. Once an Asylum Seeker was granted status in the UK then they become eligible for the local authority to accommodate. As such, every household in emergency bed and breakfast accommodation would be eligible for support and not awaiting assessment.

In response to queries around how many households in TA were being successfully housed by the Council, officers highlighted that homelessness was no longer a route to social housing which was the message the Council were trying to impress upon the public, using a communications strategy to educate the public about what they could expect. It was explained that homelessness was a crisis situation and therefore required a crisis response and something instant. The tables in the report showed that, because of the supply and demand issues for social housing, people were waiting on the housing list for 15-20 years before they were allocated social housing, which was not a response to homelessness. Now there were over 1,000 tenants in bed and breakfast and the way the Council was trying to end their homelessness was through getting them into PRS accommodation and also encouraging them to find their own PRS accommodation that the Council could help financially to secure. Pre-pandemic, the Council had been able to get around 35-40 households per month into PRS, but post pandemic this was closer to 3 per week. On the 'Find Your Home' scheme there had only been around 8-9 secured over the previous few months, showing that not many people were finding their own, likely because they could not find any PRS in Brent where they wanted to live.

The Committee asked whether the Council had a policy for reducing the use of hotels in Wembley for the use of TA. Laurence Coaker explained that the use of Wembley hotels had been commissioned by the Home Office pre-pandemic for the use of housing Asylum Seekers and therefore the Council had no control over that. One of the larger hotels had recently been decommissioned by the Home Office and the Council were in negotiations to take over. In terms of the Councils general approach towards hotel accommodation, officers explained that this was governed by law. The Council only used hotels, bed and breakfast, and interim accommodation during the period that Housing Needs was assessing a case during the relief duty period of 56 days. Once that assessment was completed and the Council either accepted the main duty or not, that household should be moved on. The difficulty was there was no available accommodation to move those households on to.

The Chair invited Brent Youth Parliament to contribute. They asked whether Housing Needs had an understanding of how many young people aged between 16-25 years old were in housing need and whether the work being done to improve employability skills of those in housing need took young people into consideration specifically. Officers advised that Housing Need worked in partnership with the children's service regarding 16-18 year olds. For 18-25 year olds in housing need there were statistics for how many were considered a single homeless person which could be provided after the meeting. It was not possible to get the figures on how many 16-25 year olds were part of families that were considered homeless. It was added that the statistics for single homelessness tended to show an older age group rather than 18-25 year olds. There was a separate policy for care leavers with children's services, and the Council aimed to obtain social housing for that cohort to offer stability and security of tenure. In relation to the work being done to improve employability skills, officers confirmed there were schemes to help people into employment as the link between affordability and homelessness was well proven and if the Council could get people into employment that increased their chances and opportunities to find a property they could afford. This was a general service to help all people in need of support with nothing specifically aimed towards younger people.

In relation to supply, the Committee noted that there was a high number of empty properties in the borough and asked whether there was a policy around undertaking Compulsory Purchase Orders (CPOs) to bring empty properties back into use for the purpose of alleviating homelessness. Peter Gadsdon confirmed that the Council had a Private Rented Sector (PRS) Service who dealt with empty properties in the borough that did not belong to the Council to bring them back into use. Spencer Randolph provided further details, highlighting that the Council had a proactive Empty Homes Team of 3 officers who encouraged owners to bring their properties back into use through various routes. For example, the team could offer landlords grant assistance to refurbish them and bring them back into use, and there was the threat of enforcement. However, the Council avoided enforcement routes where possible as it was a very lengthy and costly process to bring only a few properties back into use. The Council had recently completed a CPO and it had taken 5 years to go through that process. Councillor Butt added that the government had began discussions around right to buy and reducing the discounts for that, but if the CPO route could be made simpler that would be helpful to Councils.

The Committee noted that some accommodation was being found outside of the borough in areas like High Wycombe and Wendover and asked if that approach was likely to continue. Laurence Coaker explained that the reason the Council was having to look out of borough in those areas was because the Council had a statutory duty to provide accommodation when a household became homeless and if Brent or London was full due to the contraction of the PRS then the Council had no choice but to look elsewhere to prevent families from being homeless. The Council was receiving around 130 applications per week for housing need. The Council was also being proactive at encouraging people to find their own affordable properties that worked for them.

The Committee noted the length of time some tenants were remaining in TA, highlighting that for some TA seemed to have become permanent. Laurence Coaker explained that this was due to the gap between the supply of social housing and the demand. Anyone in TA was considered a priority, and was placed in priority band C. Bands A-C could all bid for properties through Locata.

The Committee asked whether Locata was fit for purpose. They were advised that Locata acted as a vehicle for allocating properties using a choice-based letting system, which meant people were able to bid for the properties they wanted and was more effective than the previous allocations scheme.

The Committee asked how helpful the grants the Council received were in relieving homelessness. Laurence Coaker advised they were very helpful but not enough to improve the situation. The Homelessness Prevention Grant was tied to the Council's performance in the prevention of homelessness and the number of people in TA, and whilst the government had announced an uplift in the recent budget, it was still not enough to close the gap.

The Committee asked how the number of presentations Brent Council was receiving compared to neighbouring boroughs. Officers explained that presentation numbers were high in Brent compared to sub-regional neighbours, but that it was more realistic to compare Brent to areas with similar demographics and size such as Newham and Haringey where Brent had similar presentation numbers.

In response to a query on how many households presenting in Brent were living in Brent or had come from outside of the borough, Laurence Coaker advised that the majority of presentations were from people who already lived in Brent. The legislation allowed for the Council to apply a local connection rule where if a household presented with no local connection to Brent they would be referred to where they did have local connections. There were also family reunion cases where an Asylum Seeker had received status in the UK and had applied for their family to join them from abroad, which Brent received a disproportionate amount of due to the attractiveness of Brent being a diverse borough. As to whether the Council was keeping those families in Brent, officers advised that the Council did try to accommodate them in Brent or London but many of the families were very large, sometimes with up to 14 members, and it was highly unlikely there would be a property large enough and affordable in Brent or London to accommodate them.

The Committee asked whether there was a strategy pan-London around the homelessness situation. Laurence Coaker explained that the government were considering a Rough Sleeping Homelessness Strategy, and the Council worked collaboratively with other London borough and through London Councils to have pan-London initiatives to tackle homelessness collectively.

As no further issues were raised, the Chair drew the discussion to a close and the Committee RESOLVED to note the content of the report.

During the discussion an information request was raised, recorded as follows:

- i) To provide the number of single homeless people aged 18-25 to Brent Youth Parliament.

9. Community and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee Recommendations Tracker

The Committee noted the recommendations tracker.

10. Any other urgent business

The Chair informed the Committee that this would be Peter Gadsdon's final meeting at the Community and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee. He thanked Peter for all the support he had offered the Committee over the years and wished him luck for the future.

The meeting closed at 8:10 pm
COUNCILLOR KETAN SHETH, Chair