MINUTES OF THE COMMUNITY AND WELLBEING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
Tuesday 21 September 2021 at 6.00 pm

PRESENT: Councillor Ketan Sheth (Chair), Councillor Kansagra (substituting for Councillor Colwill), and Councillors Aden, Afzal, Daly, Ethapemi, Shahzad and Thakkar, and co-opted member Mr Alloysius Frederick .

Also Present (in remote capacity): Councillor Lloyd

In attendance (in remote capacity): Councillor Southwood, Councillor McLennan, Councillor Mili Patel

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

Apologies were received as follows:

- Councillor Colwill, substituted by Councillor Kansagra
- Councillor Sangani
- Co-opted member Mr Simon Goulden
- Co-opted member Rev. Helen Askwith

2. **Declarations of interests**

Personal interests were declared as follows:

- Councillor Sheth – Lead Governor of Central and NWL NHS Foundation Trust
- Councillor Shahzad – spouse employed by the NHS
- Councillor Ethapemi – spouse employed by the NHS

3. **Deputations (if any)**

There were no deputations received.

4. **Minutes of the previous meeting**

The minutes of the meeting on 8 July 2021 were approved as an accurate record of the meeting, subject to an amendment to include Councillor Aden as in attendance.

The minutes of the meeting on 23 August 2021 were discussed, including the draft recommendations of the meeting. The minutes were approved subject to the following amendments and additions:

- To include reference to the discussion on diversity within the Maternity Voices Partnership.
- To include an information request for the number of midwives (community and hospital) employed by London North West for the past 10 years, including data on the number of births and mothers in the community where post-natal care was provided by Northwick Park.
- To include an information request for details of the bandings and grades of midwives and number of years' experience.

- To include an information request for details of the progression route within the grading structure, including progression of midwives over the past 4 years.
- To include an information request for details of the community midwifery service including how many midwives were employed in that area and their caseloads.

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

The Committee considered the response received to their recommendations on the Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy presented at the previous meeting.

In considering the response, the Committee requested the following:

- For the Director of Public Health to revisit the language used in the document so that it was more accessible, particularly the references to the matrix approach.
- That the Terms of Reference for the Healthwatch activity be provided to the Committee.
- That further details of the strategies the work was linked to be provided to the Committee.

6. **Homelessness and Services for Families**

Councillor Southwood (Lead Member for Housing and Welfare Reform) introduced the item, which provided an update on the services delivered for homeless families during the pandemic. She advised the Committee that the service had adjusted to support homelessness during the pandemic. The ban on evictions ended in May 2021, which meant family homelessness had been a focus recently, and although there had not been a large increase in family homelessness yet, she felt the service needed to be constantly vigilant to any patterns or increases. She advised the Committee that the Council wanted to work with people before their need for homeless services occurred.

The Chair thanked Councillor Southwood for her introduction and invited the Committee to raise comments and questions, with the following issues raised:

The Committee commended the paper and felt it would be useful to circulate to all Councillors as it provided a good summary of the homelessness service.

The Committee queried how the service could improve communications with people who might find themselves very suddenly placed out of borough, which they advised could be very distressing. Councillor Southwood acknowledged that the nature of needing emergency accommodation and then having to live somewhere you did not know was challenging. The impact on children could mean that they did not make friends because they did not know if they would be going back to the same schools. Councillor Southwood advised that the Council always tried to minimise those numbers. The reasons behind being placed out of borough were largely around affordability for larger homes, which was part of the drive behind the number of Council homes being built in the Borough. The Committee were advised that when someone approached the service they were made aware from day 1 about the potential to be placed out of borough. The service focused on signposting to employment support, given the affordability challenges for those affected by the benefit cap, and supporting a family to find their own accommodation where possible. By law, a person could spend no more than 6 weeks in a Bed and Breakfast, by which time the Council needed to move them on to private sector accommodation that they could afford. With the whole of London competing for these types of properties, accommodation went at pace, and therefore this impacted on the notice period that the service could give for moves out of borough, although the family would have been made aware of the possibility for this from the outset.

Continuing to discuss the circumstances around emergency and out of borough accommodation, Laurence Coaker (Head of Housing Needs, Brent Council) advised that he worked closely with the Housing Supply Team to ensure the Council were building what was needed, with the aim to reduce the offers of out of Borough places. There was good news in relation to emergency accommodation, as the Temporary Accommodation block at Anansi House in Harlesden was due to be handed over in October 2021, which had 94 rooms for emergency provision and was Council owned. This meant the Council were no longer reliant on emergency B&B accommodation which resulted in out of borough placements when they were full. Hakeem Osinaike (Operational Director of Housing, Brent Council) added that there was no other local authority doing more than Brent to resolve the housing crisis. The Cabinet had set a target to build 1,000 new homes by 2024 which the Council were doing, and the Council were on course to deliver 1,600 within that time frame. The Council had also recently sourced a £111m grant from the GLA which the Council would supplement with a further £3m to build 701 homes by 2029. He highlighted the Council were doing a lot to try to meet the demand with good quality, well managed and affordable accommodation.

The Chair queried how sensitive Housing Officers were in the community when dealing with those families who were at risk of homelessness or were homeless. Councillor Southwood highlighted that Laurence Coaker and his team were very mindful of how somebody felt when they had spoken with a Housing Officer. She advised that the Council did not always get this right but had focused this year on ensuring users engaging with the service were supported and made to feel listened to, and treated with respect and dignity.

The Committee asked about the support provided to families for filling out the required forms and ensuring they answered all required eligibility questions. Councillor Southwood advised that service users did need support filling in forms, and during the pandemic these types of forms had moved online. She felt that in some ways this had created a more tailored service as there had been more communication involved and the form used a clear set of questions, however the Council were very mindful of digitally excluded people, or whose first language was not English, or those who otherwise may not be able to fill out an online form without support. The homelessness team did support those people, and always maintained a physical presence at the Civic Centre, including throughout the pandemic, so that vulnerable people or those who could not use or access IT were able to receive face to face support from officers to fill in forms.

The Committee commended the new domestic abuse service, and queried the security of the grant funding for that service. Councillor Southwood expressed that they were very proud of the service, and were confident people experiencing domestic abuse within the borough had a strong service to come to. Laurence Coaker advised that the team referenced in the papers did grow very quickly, and the posts were permanent, substantive, and accounted for in the budget. The reference in the report to grant funding was for a support worker to go into the specialist accommodation secured for victims of domestic abuse. He forecast that the funding would be made available again so that it could remain a continuous service. In response to a query about elder abuse and whether there had been any changes in experience over the pandemic, Laurence Coaker agreed to look into this and provide that information to the Committee.

In terms of the people who used or were at risk of needing to use the service, the Committee queried whether there were any trends in demographics or particular communities that were overrepresented. Laurence Coaker advised that they did have data on demographics and had done an equality impact assessment looking at the demographics of the people who applied to the service and received help from the service. The Committee were advised that the people applying to the service, in terms of age, sex and ethnicity, matched the profile of the cohort who were assisted. The driving force behind

those making applications was affordability and evictions as a result of rent arrears, therefore people applying and receiving the service were more likely to be on low incomes and / or affected by the overall benefits cap. It was also acknowledged that a single homeless person had much more chance of finding accommodation than a larger family. The Committee requested further information on which communities were overrepresented within the service, and what the service was doing to engage with those communities.

The Committee highlighted paragraphs 3.9 and 3.10 of the report, which showed a drop in applications. They queried whether this was a result of the pandemic or because other agencies stepped in to help such as Church Groups. Laurence Coaker advised that the report concerned family homelessness and the statistics did not reflect single homelessness, so the reduction was due to the pandemic. The 8% reduction reflected the years between 2019-20 and 2020-21 which was a result of the ban on evictions during Covid-19, and the data for 2021-22 only covered April 2021 – July 2021.

The Committee queried the role of Capital Letters in assisting the Council to provide Housing. Laurence Coaker advised that Capital Letters played a huge role in securing alternative private sector accommodation, but could not prevent people being evicted from their current private rented accommodation. They supplied new accommodation to stop people having to go into emergency B & B accommodation or Temporary Accommodation. In terms of how well equipped Housing Officers were to find accommodation that a family could afford, Laurence Coaker advised that the Council encouraged people to find their own accommodation so that they could choose where they would live in and in turn be more invested in it, but where they were unable to find their own accommodation Capital Letters provided a safety net of between 30-40 units per month which officers could offer to them. He advised that officers supported people using the service heavily, talking them through their affordability and the areas they could go within that affordability, including who they could talk to for securing a property. The Council's Housing Officers also helped negotiate with landlords, helped towards deposits where necessary, and gave landlords an incentive to give families an extended tenancy.

Regarding tenancy sustainment, Councillor Southwood advised that one of the areas the service focused on was the number of people who, after 2 years of being placed in private rented sector accommodation, had come back to the Council as homeless. The statistics currently did not reflect any concern in that area but it was something the service were constantly vigilant of. Laurence Coaker added that Capital Letter provided a sustainment service, so after a family had signed up with Capital Letters they would stay in contact with them until they were settled.

The Committee advised that there were a number of good private landlords who could fill the gap for housing. Laurence Coaker agreed and advised the Committee that Brent had one of the largest private sector landlord forums with over 600 representatives, and that this was promoted vigorously alongside Capital Letters, who were now the main agent for London procurement and were invited to the forum on a quarterly basis.

The Committee queried how the service monitored the standards of accommodation offered. Councillor Southwood advised that in respect of standards the Council may be able to do more if the government permitted licensing across the Borough, but the team who looked after standards of accommodation had now resumed their visits into properties to review standards of accommodation. She asked members to keep reporting where they thought there might be a HMO not of the standard it should be.

The Committee ended their questions by asking how Councillor Southwood used feedback she had received to form her thinking as a Cabinet Lead to design the service for residents. Councillor Southwood advised that when she received emails from councillors regarding their casework she would look into the themes around that particular case, and if there had

been similar issues within a short timescale that would be something she would raise with Laurence Coaker and his team. Sometimes emails related to a one-off issue but other times it may point to a part of the process that could be improved.

The Chair drew the item to a close and invited the Committee to make recommendations, with the following RESOLVED:

i) For a further update on community engagement for this service to be provided at the 14 March 2022 Community and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee meeting.

A number of information requests were also raised during the meeting, recorded as follows:

i) For officers to provide the Committee with information on the cases of disabled and / or elder abuse, including how many are affected, their demographics and the support the Council offers.

ii) For officers to provide the Committee with further information on the people who are using the service and also at risk of using the service in the future, including demographics and overrepresented cohorts. To also provide details of the personalised/targeted support for these groups and the engagement undertaken.

iii) For officers to circulate the paper presented to Committee to the wider group of councillors.

iv) For officers to provide the Committee with further information on Capital Letters and the support offered to those seeking housing in the Private Rented Sector.

7. **Brent Housing Management Services and Performance**

Councillor Southwood (Lead Member for Housing and Welfare Reform) introduced the report, which updated the Committee on the operational performance of Brent Housing Management (BHM). She advised that the service had considered what good performance meant, and were focusing on particular areas. One area of focus was around how the service handled complaints when things went wrong. Another area of focus was on customer service and reminding staff across BHM of the customer experience, how it felt to be a customer and why transactional surveys had been introduced, in which customers who received a service from BHM immediately received a survey about their experience. She felt the report provided a solid evidence base for where BHM would be focusing its efforts.

The Chair noted that performance of BHM had been previously reported to the Community and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee, in which the Committee had made some recommendations about better customer engagement. He highlighted that a theme running through the paper was about resident engagement and satisfaction, with the paper highlighting that satisfaction had gone down. In response, Councillor Southwood advised that the past 18 months had been difficult regarding housing and how people lived in and experienced their homes, which might be reflected in the dip in satisfaction. She highlighted that other Housing Services had seen a similar drop. The Committee were advised that residents reported being dissatisfied with anti-social behaviour and the cleanliness of the area they lived. She also acknowledged that since performance was last presented to the Committee the service had focused on improving processes and now needed to focus on the support and communication offered to residents, which was where the conversation was evolving now with the leadership team.

The Committee felt that there had been a noticeable effort to improve communications with residents but felt it was not where it needed to be yet. They requested that a map of who was who in housing be provided, from the director of housing down, so that councillors and residents alike could know who a resident's Housing Officer was. Members of the Committee noted that contact details given to residents to respond to section 20 notifications and consultations sometimes posed challenges including where there was no named contact, or a phone number dialled through to a full mailbox, which could impact section 20 consultations. In addition, the Committee felt there was still mistrust between residents and the housing department, and residents did not feel listened to. Councillor Southwood assured the Committee that the intention was to nurture and support residents and resident groups such as associations. She highlighted that there had been a plan to move to a patch based model, where Housing Officers had responsibility for a particular area, so that residents would know who their officer was and the officer was accountable, however for various reasons relating to the pandemic that plan had been slowed down. She felt the service could be smarter in terms of resident communication and engagement and would think about how they involved councillors in supporting that relationship between housing officers and residents, which may help resolve some of the cases on the ground. The service had also conducted two 'spotlight' sessions for residents which had presented a mix of opinions. Hakeem Osinaike (Operational Director Housing, Brent Council) added that Housing Officers had resumed walkabouts at all levels and himself, Councillor Southwood, and the Strategic Director Community Wellbeing had also done walkabouts, where officers took pictures, agreed actions and went back to residents on issues. He advised there were a lot of actions that had only recently started to happen due to pandemic delays that he believed would have an impact in the weeks and months to come.

Continuing to discuss resident engagement, the Committee highlighted the data in the report that 31% of residents felt the Council did not listen to or act on their views, which had resulted in a number of changes such as Housing Officer presence, surveys and workshops, and hosting meetings at a more local level. They queried what assurances could be given to residents that those processes would result in them being actively listened to. Councillor Southwood felt one way to assure residents was to be completely clear about why the service had made a particular change or improvement, and therefore a monthly newsletter called Spotlight had been introduced to highlight these changes. The newsletter aimed to be explicit about what the service had heard and what the service had done about it. She advised that the service wanted to get much better and stronger about letting residents know how they had acted on their feedback on a much more regular basis. Hakeem Osinaike added that the Council had a customer experience panel which was made up of tenants and leaseholders from different parts of the Borough, who served as a form of informal scrutiny through looking at BHM's performance, and as a consultation body through testing out new systems, policies and processes.

In relation to the Council's communication with residents about repairs, the Committee highlighted that residents did not always get enough communication as to what was next in the repair process, for example for a complex repair where multiple tradespeople or contractors were involved. Councillor Southwood agreed to give further information on the repairs system which would clearly set out what people should expect from repairs. Where residents were not being communicated with regarding ongoing repairs, Councillor Southwood agreed it was not good enough and even if the repair could not be immediately resolved communication could always be done. She was clear that whoever delivered a repair or service to Brent Council residents, the relationship was between the resident and the Council and therefore the Council needed to hold accountability for communication. With regard to complex repairs, Phil Porter (Strategic Director Community Wellbeing, Brent Council) advised that the Council were working with Wates to put together a specific team within Wates who would batch those complex repairs together, including a specific Repairs Manager who would manage those on a daily basis through very tight supervision. Giuseppe Coia (Head of Service – Housing Management Property, Brent Council) added

that Wates had now moved into the Civic Centre and worked closely with officers within the Council. Issues with complex repairs, where there was more than one step involved in a repair such as multiple operatives, was identified as a problem a few months prior to the meeting, and it was acknowledged that the multiple appointments and different surveyors and visitors entering the home caused frustration and disruption to residents. The new team set up to manage repairs on a planned basis would ensure ownership of these complex repairs either by Wates, the Council, or jointly, and that responsible party would see the repairs through to completion. There were currently around 700-800 complex repairs but he was confident that the new team had already started to make inroads and that the work would be successful.

In discussing the Council's relationship with Wates as a contractor, the Committee queried what KPIs had been set up and asked how the Council put pressure on them to complete targets. Councillor Southwood agreed to share some written details on the contract with Wates to the Committee. Councillor Southwood advised that the relationship with Wates was regular, with officers interacting with Wates on a daily basis. Senior management also met with Wates regularly with Councillor Southwood attending where there were particular issues. For example, a few years prior when concerns had been raised on the progress of fire safety work everybody contributed to improving that situation. Hakeem Osinaike advised that Wates did around 30,000 repairs a year, and where things went wrong the Council and Wates tried to act very quickly to address those issues. With the introduction of transactional surveys BHM could learn very quickly and address the issues just as quickly. Phil Porter added that the Council were clear with Wates what they wanted them to achieve and held them to account on repairs.

Continuing their discussion of the repairs process, the Committee asked what the average timescales were. Hakeem Osinaike advised that the intention for repairs was to complete all repairs as soon as possible. If somebody made a request for a repair through the app they could make an appointment straight away at their own convenience, and similarly if someone reported a repair through the telephone contact centre they would be given an appointment depending on their own availability. BHM monitored how many repairs they were able to complete within 2 weeks of it being reported, and these figures were detailed within the report. There were some statutory repairs that needed to be completed within 24 hours and those targets for emergency repairs were met 100%. He added that most landlords had targets to complete ordinary repairs within 28 days, compared to BHM who did them within a maximum 2 week period, with the majority completed within a week depending on the availability of the person requesting the repair. In the case of a repair that affected more than one flat and therefore required access to 2 homes there was a written down process. Hakeem Osinaike advised that the law prevented BHM from accessing other people's properties without permission, and therefore there was a need for extenuating circumstances before they could do so. If the issue was serious then BHM could access the property without consent and fix the issue, but if not then they made every attempt to contact the residents for access, with the final resort being to apply for a court injunction to enter the property.

The Committee queried how the fire safety programme was carried out and how fire safety messages were being communicated to residents. Phil Porter advised that there had been some delays at the start of the programme but it had now been delivered with high levels of satisfaction. Giuseppe Coia advised that the programme was very ambitious and highlighted that, to undertake and deliver the programme, there was a need to access every single low and medium rise block, conversion and flat in the Borough multiple times due to the different trades involved. This required the Council to write to residents, hold consultation meetings, arrange newsletters and hold additional visits and there had been many problems with access throughout the programme. The programme had now been delivered which had left all low and medium rise homes in a very good condition for fire safety and also in décor, meaning they were fit for the future. He acknowledged that

moving forward there was a need to find a way to work and engage better with residents where there were access requirements for the delivery of a programme.

In response to queries from the Committee about the master key for access to buildings mentioned in section 4.10 of the report, Giuseppe Coia advised that the common areas of Council blocks and conversions belonged to the Council, and while the Council recognised and respected that residents used them for access the Council were responsible for maintaining those areas. There was now a lot of specialist fire safety equipment in those areas needing to be maintained, and in the past the Council and contractors had serious problems attempting to access those areas. For that reason, the Council had written to all residents explaining the need for a master key to access communal areas. Residents still had their own key to their own homes, but the main entrance door to each property had a key the Council could use to gain access to communal areas whenever was required. Where possible, the Council also gave notice to residents that they would be accessing the block.

The Committee queried whether there were any residents waiting for adaptations within their homes. Hakeem Osinaike advised that the current year a budget for adaptations had been set at £800,000 for Brent Council properties, but BHM had realised that would not be enough so a further £300,000 had been allocated to adaptations. The previous year the Council had spent £1m on adaptations and had an £800,000 provision in the budget each year for the next 2 years. He advised that at the beginning of each year the Council assessed what people needed and had a contractor in place who would do those adaptations within the year. There was a priority list for the type of adaptation as it was assessment based. Residents could self-refer or were referred by Adult Social Care, Hospitals, GPs and Primary Care. Phil Porter added that they had done more adaptations across Council Housing and the Private Rented Sector last year than they had ever done, and he was not made aware of any people waiting longer than a year for adaptations.

The Committee highlighted section 3.12 of the report which stated that email and text notifications to residents generated no interest. Phil Porter advised that when surveys were sent out on an automated basis did not always get a good response which was why the Council had pursued residents and made call outs. He agreed that, as well as dealing with clauses in Wates contract, it was important to focus on resident satisfaction and therefore the Council would not only rely on semi-automated responses but would follow up to gather the best understanding of resident views and the problems they might be facing.

Hakeem Osinaike confirmed that the Council knew exactly how many tenants they had, where they were leaseholders including the people who lived in them, and conducted tenancy audits to verify their information.

The Chair drew the item to a close and invited Committee members to make recommendations, with the following RESOLVED:

i) To recommend that officers provide the Committee with an annual progress report on resident engagement which includes engagement with Section 20 consultations and the challenges of digital exclusion.

ii) To recommend that the engagement framework is made available in an accessible way for all residents.

iii) To recommend a report detailing the progress of fire safety work is brought back to the Committee at its meeting on 22 February 2022.

A number of information requests were also made during the discussion, which were as follows:

i) For officers to provide the Committee with a structure chart of the service, including details of Housing Officers.

ii) For officers to provide the Committee with further information on what users can expect from the repairs service, including a clear step-by-step guide of the repairs process.

iii) For officers to provide the Committee with further information on adaptations they undertake, including the approach taken, the waiting list, and priority assessment process.

iv) For officers to provide the Committee with information on any work underway so that community facilities on estates can be utilised by residents.

v) For officers to provide the Committee with written details of the Wates repair contract including how the Council monitor key performance indicators.

8. **GP Access Scrutiny Task Group Verbal Update**

The Chair of the Community and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee invited the Chair of the GP Access Scrutiny Task Group, Councillor Mary Daly, to provide a verbal update on the progress of the task group. Councillor Daly advised that the task group had now met with the range of people one might expect within the health service, and heard about the pressures on the service including staff shortages. The task group had heard of the large workload being experienced within primary care, and about those in acute mental health crisis. A meeting with mental health services in the borough was being arranged to explore that. The task group also wanted to explore primary care since it had reopened following the full easing of government restrictions and find out the experience of residents, which Healthwatch would help with. A questionnaire would be drafted which Councillor Daly hoped to bring to memory lounges, carers, young parents, men and food banks. In terms of primary care the task group would focus on two wards in particular which were Preston Ward and Stonebridge Ward. She advised that the task group was about partnership and protecting primary care.

The Chair thanked Councillor Daly for the update and invited Jonathan Turner (Borough Director, NWL ICS) to comment. Jonathan Turner advised that he had been working closely with the task group and attending the evidence sessions. It had been helpful to hear the perspective of councillors and residents around primary care. There were currently a few programmes taking place looking to reduce the variation in outcomes across GPs, and looking at access itself such as the number of appointment slots that GPs had available, and he felt it would be useful to supplement that with the intelligence the task group were getting. He requested that councillors continued to let him know where they were hearing about patients being unable to get appointments, and looked forward to the final report and recommendations.

9. **Transitional Safeguarding Task Group**

The Chair advised the Committee that he intended to put together a task group looking at transitional safeguarding, and would work with officers to draft a scoping paper and go out to colleagues to discuss the membership of the proposed task group.

10. **Any other urgent business**

None.

The meeting closed at 8:00 pm
COUNCILLOR KETAN SHETH