



MINUTES OF THE RESOURCES AND PUBLIC REALM SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
Held as an Online Virtual Meeting on Wednesday 09 February 2022 at 6.00 pm

PRESENT: Councillor Kansagra (Chair) and Councillors S Choudhary, Conneely, Johnson, Kabir, and Long

Also Present: Councillors Butt, McLennan, Knight, Krupa Sheth and Tatler.

1. Apologies for absence and clarification of alternate members

Apologies for absence were received from:

- Councillor Miller, Shah and Hassan

2. Declarations of interests

None.

3. Deputations (if any)

None.

4. Minutes of the previous meeting

It was **RESOLVED** that the minutes of the previous meeting held on 18 January 2022 be approved as a correct record.

5. Matters arising (if any)

None.

6. Topical issue – Flooding in Brent

Chris Whyte (Operational Director, Environmental and Employment Services) opened the item. The Committee were asked to note that this report was an extension of the item heard at the November meeting of the Committee, and related to the responsibilities that the Council and its partners held in regard to managing flood risk in the borough. The update was presented in conjunction with Thames Water, as per the request of the Committee at a previous meeting. The Chair invited Alex Nickson (Thames Water Lead- Live Flooding) to provide an update. It was noted that Thames Water as a body were responsible for the effects of sewer flooding, with the Council responsible for the effects of surface water flooding. It was clarified that the Environment Agency was responsible for larger rivers.

Moving on to the impact of the July flooding on the borough, it was explained that on the 12th July 2021 London experienced a convective storm, which was a large amount

of rainfall in a short period of time. This led to water overwhelming sewers as well as flooding homes overnight. As a result, an Independent Review had been commissioned in order to establish what happened, as well as to what degree, if any, systems failed to provide the expected level of protection. This review would produce a set of recommendations about how flood risk could be better managed in the future. These recommendations would be provided to other agencies, such as the Highways Agency and the London Fire Brigade. When these recommendations were published, it was explained that Thames Water would work with Local Authorities to ensure that the recommendations were actioned. This would result in properties being better equipped to deal with sewer flooding in future.

The Committee was then invited to raise questions on the information provided, which focussed on a number of key areas, as highlighted below:

- Clarification was sought by the Committee as to what changes had been made since last year in terms of flooding. It was answered that tangible changes could be made once the Independent Review had been published, though work was currently underway to prevent sewer flooding in the most high risk properties. It was also updated that resources had been increased in the call centre and more staff were trained to respond in a crisis in order to reduce waiting times.
- With regards to the drainage programme statement, it was asked when this would be extended to Kilburn, an area which had previously been flooded, as well as the wider Brent area. It was updated that a major drainage upgrade had been implemented in 2015 in the Maida Vale intersection, however it was acknowledged that Thames Water would have to work with the borough, as sewers did not have an unlimited capacity. It was explained that the Independent Review would provide information on which areas required more resilience and how to better protect properties.
- In regards to new properties being built in the borough, the Committee asked how Thames Water would work with the Local Authority to ensure that these homes had effective drainage systems. It was clarified that Thames Water was not a statutory consultee, however there was a free application process where developers could liaise with Thames Water to discuss how buildings could be more sustainable.
- Regarding the response to the July flooding, it was asked what training had been undertaken to ensure this would not happen again and to ensure that support was effective for residents. It was heard that, due to the impact of the flooding in July, there were thousands of people attempting to contact for assistance. Lessons had been learned from this, with the Committee told that six areas for improvement had been highlighted, as well as fourteen actions, with nine of the fourteen actions already implemented. This response would be collaborative, including with Local Authorities, as well as with services such as the London Fire Brigade and the Police. It was noted that the systems had been successfully tested thus far, with few issues resulting out of storms in August and October 2021.
- Following on from this, timescales were requested for when the full fourteen actions were likely to be completed, to which it was answered that some included third party participation, such as working with utility companies to establish a list of vulnerable customers in the result of flooding.

- It was queried how the Independent Review was set up and of whom it comprised, to which it was answered that it comprised of three independent experts, working alongside consultants who would implement the suggested recommendations. The review was funded by Thames Water, though the review acted as an impartial and independent assessment. It was clarified that residents could engage in this process, through londonreview.co.uk, where they were able to submit evidence and recommendations. The Chair of the Committee had also met with Councillors and MPs in affected boroughs, with a focus on the Maida Vale area.
- The Committee requested further detail on the Council's multi-agency flood plan, as well as what work was being done with neighbouring councils. It was answered that scoping was currently underway, as well as identifying areas to work with other boroughs, particularly in relation to green spaces. It was also noted that Committee members would be able to contribute to this plan later in 2022.
- When asked whether Brent was regarded as a priority for sewer infrastructure upgrades, it was answered that it was thought that Brent was covered by the business as usual work, though if there were specific areas that Thames Water be informed. In terms of wider funding, it was answered that there was not a proportional funding formula by borough. It was noted that this could be investigated to see if it were possible.
- It was asked whether Thames Water could provide more information on the release of sewage into the River Brent, to which it was clarified that this was outside of the remit of officers present. However, Thames Water were of the opinion that this was unacceptable, so work was ongoing with the Government and the Environmental Agency to ensure that this practice was stopped.
- A query was raised around if there were a list of complaints prior to the 12th July flooding, to which it was responded that a flooding questionnaire was provided to residents who had been affected by flooding to establish the causes and solutions. The customer contact centre also tracked and formally recorded all complaints about flooding, which formed the evidence base for creating the solutions to flooding. It was clarified that after July this questionnaire was available online, though paper copies could be mailed to residents where required.
- A question was raised regarding burst pipes and the impact this had on local homes and traffic, and whether plans were in place to upgrade the pipe work in the borough. It was answered that funding had been provided to upgrade older pipes across London due to ageing infrastructure. It was noted that this work was being done on a priority basis, where there was the highest level of need, alongside reactive maintenance programmes.
- It was asked if there were lines of communication in place with organisations such as the police to stop traffic going down flooded roads, to which it was clarified that this would be communicated with Transport for London (TFL) as well as the fire service.

It was **RESOLVED**:

- (1) That the following areas for improvement be noted:

- For the Council's Planning Department to work more closely with Thames Water on drainage issues arising from planning applications

(2) The Committee made the following information requests:

- To receive a copy of the independent review into the events of and response to the floods experienced across London in July when published and Thames Water's response to the review
- To receive information on the level of funding for drainage repairs in Brent compared to other London boroughs
- To receive an update report on the development of the Council's multi-agency flood plan in the next municipal year

7. **Fire and Building Safety Report**

Councillor Shama Tatler (Lead Member for Regeneration, Property and Planning) introduced the item. Following the tragedy that took place at Grenfell Tower in 2017, there had been extensive coverage around fire safety in buildings, particularly in high-rise buildings. Councillor Tatler outlined how the new fire safety bill would impact on the building control service in Brent.

The Committee was then invited to raise questions on the update provided, which focussed on a number of key areas as highlighted below:

- Detail was sought as to how the due diligence process had changed since the events at Grenfell Tower, to which it was answered that there had been more onus on Councils to provide building control support, as well as the fire safety regulator. There were also more rigorous checks and fire risk assessments required in buildings, throughout the construction process.
- The Committee asked what implications the legislation would have on new builds, and what impact this would have on leaseholders; it was clarified that there was a new regulatory regime in place that would have checks in place in three stages; namely the planning, construction and pre-occupation stages of buildings.
- Clarification was sought as to how this would affect residents in housing, to which it was clarified that the legislation currently covered buildings above 18 metres high, though this may be coming down to buildings of 11 metres high. It was also noted that the legislation was not final, and that the Council would wait for the final legislation before being able to enforce any powers.
- It was asked what measures had been taken to improve fire safety in Brent housing stock, to which it was responded that this query would be best directed to Housing and the portfolio held by Councillor Southwood (Lead Member for Housing and Welfare Reform).
- Regarding Brent's private housing stock, it was asked what role the Building Control Team played in the enforcement of regulations in private housing blocks. It was clarified that in existing private blocks the team did not have a role as they were not the designated building control authority. However, for future blocks, the Council could play a role, meaning that the Council could be appointed as an accredited regulator for buildings in the future.

- The Committee asked what role the Brent Planning Committee would have in implementing the fire safety regulations, to which it was answered that, as part of the new legislation, fire safety would be considered throughout a planning application, and would form part of assessment of applications by the Committee.
- It was asked what mechanisms would be in place to ensure clear lines of communication between the Building Safety Regulator (BSR) and council building control services with the fire service. It was clarified that this would be covered as part of the secondary legislation of the bill, though it was expected that the building control services at the council would work with the fire safety regulator and the fire service as part of a multidisciplinary team.
- In terms of staffing, the Committee queried whether the Building Control Department was currently understaffed, to which it was responded that there were enough staff to deal with the current levels of work in the Borough, but that a recruitment exercise was underway to recruit Surveyors of varying experience levels. There was also a focus on younger Surveyors and apprentices in this recruitment exercise, to enable effective succession planning.
- Additionally to this point, it was asked whether negotiations were in place with other London Councils around filling staff shortages, as well as the cost that the new legislation would place on Councils. It was answered that the levels of expertise in building surveyors was a national issue, though Brent were focused on recruiting new Officers with competency around the new legislation.
- It was asked whether a publicity campaign would be undertaken to promote the new legislation across the Borough, which was noted as being taken on board going forward.
- It was asked whether, under the new legislation, a surveyor would be held professionally liable for making a mistake, to which it was clarified that this would be the same as with any professional role in the council, and that there were elements in the surveyor qualifications to ensure that competencies and standards were maintained.
- In terms of funding for the implementation of the new legislation, it was asked how this would be paid for and who would provide the funding, to which it was responded that there was no details as of yet on wider funding or fee levels for applications, though it was clarified that the cost of Officers being trained and sitting exams would be covered by the Government.
- Responding to a point around Brent sharing its expertise with other Boroughs in London, it was clarified that Brent did work on some of the tallest towers in London and currently did sell building control services to other Boroughs in London.
- Regarding opportunities for career progression for new surveyors, it was updated that entry level roles would be provided as well as the apprentice scheme following on at a later stage in order to first build professional resilience within the team. It was also updated that there would be routes for employees who wanted to make a career shift into the building control sector.
- In the event of a shortage of staff, and whether there were mechanisms in place with other London Councils to share staffing resources; it was answered that Councils were looking to work collaboratively on this issue, and that Brent worked with the West London Alliance (WLA) and would also have conversations with the Local Government Association (LGA).

It was **RESOLVED**:

(1) The Committee made the following information requests:

- To receive information on London Fire Brigade fire safety awareness communication plans and the work undertaken through the Safer Brent Partnership to develop and promote these plans

The following information requests were made which related to the remit of the Community and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee. It was noted that these information requests would be sought in consultation with the Chair of the Community and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee:

- To receive a breakdown of the current and future high-risk buildings in Brent and the work undertaken by the Council to improve fire safety standards across high-risk buildings since Grenfell
- To receive information on the Council's role in ensuring fire safety standards in private housing blocks and the actions taken to do so

8. **Communications and Public Engagement Report**

Councillor Mohammed Butt (Leader, Brent Council) introduced the report, outlining the key themes and issues. In terms of consultation and engagement, it was noted as being vital for the Council to effectively work with partner organisations in order to establish tangible outcomes. This could be seen from the Council's response to Covid-19, working with the NHS and community groups as well as Councillors to ensure that effective messaging was being conveyed to residents. A tangible positive outcome was cited as being the purchase of the Picture Palace building in Harlesden, to be used as a community asset and for the benefit of the community. This was assisted by engagement and consultation over a number of years. Additionally, there had been youth engagement events in the Borough which had taken place in Brent Civic Centre.

The Committee was then invited to raise questions on the update provided, which focussed on a number of key areas as highlighted below:

- In relation to public engagement, it was queried whether the Council could do more to engage the public in decisions. It was answered that there had been engagement with the council's budget proposals, as well as holding webinars and social media sessions regarding Covid-19 updates. The new online portal, Citizens Lab, was also referenced as a tool to engage residents. It was noted that alongside a more traditional approach, the council had also moved to a community asset based approach in terms of communications and engagement.
- Further to this point, it was asked what more the council could do to engage residents, to which it was answered that data analytics played a key role, and that it was key to understand what issues mattered to residents in order to maximise engagement. It was also updated that there was an emphasis on 'hyperlocal' work and the co-production of council policy.

- In relation to the data analytics and visits to the Council's website, it was asked whether an age breakdown of those visiting the site was provided, to which it was clarified that due to anonymity this data was not provided.
- The Committee asked for clarification on the roles that Councillors could play in communication and engagement in the Borough, to which it was clarified that Councillor expertise had been utilised in council webinars as well as publicity campaigns and as part of the response to Covid-19 in order to reach different communities.
- It was asked whether there was enough resource for the council to carry out its full scope of communication and engagement, to which it was responded that a sensible approach was required, with the approach being for communities to be empowered, with the council working as a facilitator.
- In terms of residents who did not have access to technology, it was asked how messaging would be relayed. It was updated that skills training had been administered through Brent Hubs, as well as recognising the importance of returning to face to face services and ensuring that accessibility requirements were met.
- It was asked how the council was providing residents with access to external information, advice and services, to which it was responded that work had been undertaken with mutual aid groups in the Borough, as well as in Brent Hubs, Family Wellbeing Centres and by Town Centre Managers. This was with a view to providing a more localised approach in the Borough. In terms of online engagement, it was noted that programmatic advertising was used to communicate with harder to reach communities.
- In regards to community groups, it was asked how it was ensured that representatives from these group were communicating the needs of their community, to which it was responded that it was vital to have a wide range of demographic and residents, particularly from younger age cohorts. As well as engaging with resident and community groups, it was important to get a more diverse and wider audience to contribute. It was also noted that Councillors played a key role in identifying members of the community who could contribute to council policy.
- In a question around accessibility, it was asked how the deaf community were supported in terms of consultation, to which it was answered that facilitators could use subtitles for online events. Hearing loops could be provided for live events as well and sign interpretation in English and other languages was available.

It was **RESOLVED**:

(1) The Committee made the following information requests:

- To receive further information on resident groups; namely the membership of these groups and how the Council ensures they are representative of local communities

9. **Progress Update Report**

Craig Player (Scrutiny Officer, Brent Council) introduced the Scrutiny Progress report, which outlined the issues previously considered at the Resources & Public Realm

Scrutiny Committee. The Committee noted the report and no further issues were raised.

10. **Forward Plan of Key Decisions**

The Forward Plan of Key Decisions was noted

11. **Any other Urgent Business**

None.

The meeting closed at 9.00 pm

Councillor R. Mashari
Chair