

	<p align="center">Full Council 18 September 2023</p>
	<p align="center">Report from the Corporate Director of Communities & Regeneration</p>
<p>Resources and Public Realm Committee Chair's Update Report</p>	

Wards Affected:	All
Key or Non-Key Decision:	Council
Open or Part/Fully Exempt: <small>(If exempt, please highlight relevant paragraph of Part 1, Schedule 12A of 1972 Local Government Act)</small>	Open
List of Appendices:	Two: Appendix 1: Committee Work Programme 2023 - 2024 Appendix 2: Scrutiny Recommendations Tracker
Background Papers:	None
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1.0 Executive Summary

1.1 To present Full Council with a report providing updates on the meetings and activities of the Resources and Public Realm Committee since the last Full Council meeting on 10 July 2023.

2.0 Recommendation(s)

2.1 To note the updates from the Chair of the Resources and Public Realm Scrutiny Committee.

3.0 Detail

3.1 Contribution to Borough Plan Priorities & Strategic Context

3.2. The work of the Committee contributes to the delivery of all of the strategic priorities set out in the Borough Plan 2023-2027. It seeks to ensure Council decision-making remains transparent, accountable and open, resulting in improved policies and services.

3.3 Background

3.4. Brent Council has two scrutiny committees; the Resources and Public Realm Scrutiny Committee and the Community and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee. The Council is also a member of the North West London Joint Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee (NWL JHOSC).

3.5. A scrutiny committee can look at anything which affects the borough or its inhabitants, subject to its remit.

3.6. Brent Council Standing Orders allow for the chairs of the scrutiny committees to report to ordinary Council meetings on the activities of their committees¹.

The Resources and Public Realm Scrutiny Committee

3.7. The remit of the Resources and Public Realm Scrutiny Committee is set out in the Council Constitution under the Terms of Reference for scrutiny committees². The remit of the Committee includes:

Corporate policy, partnerships and resources; Budget; Customer services; Commercial services; Planning policy; Environmental policy; Public realm; Employment and skills; IT; Recycling; Regeneration; Transport and highways; Community safety; Property; Emergency planning and business continuity.

3.8. The Committee is also the Council's "crime and disorder committee" for the purposes of Section 19 of the Police & Justice Act 2006 and as such may review or scrutinise decisions made, or other action taken, in connection with the discharge of the crime and disorder functions by the responsible authorities (as defined by section 5 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998) who make up the Safer Brent Partnership, in order to make reports or recommendations to Full Council.

¹ Brent Council Constitution, Part 2, paragraph 36.

<https://democracy.brent.gov.uk/documents/s123308/Part%202%20April%202022%20Procedural%20Rules.pdf>

² Brent Council Constitution Part 4.

<https://democracy.brent.gov.uk/documents/s123310/Part%204%20May%202022%20Terms%20of%20Reference%20.pdf>

- 3.9. Since the last update to Full Council on 10 July 2023 the Resources and Public Realm Scrutiny Committee has met two times (19 July 2023 and 6 September 2023).
19 July 2023
- 3.10. The scrutiny work programme for the 2023/24 municipal year was formally agreed by the Committee (please see Appendix 1). The programme itself is a living document, responsive to the needs of Brent residents, which will be regularly reviewed and updated accordingly where necessary. In practice, this means planned agenda items could be subject to change.
- 3.11. The Committee heard from the Deputy Leader and Cabinet member for Finances, Resources and Reform, Councillor Mili Patel, and received a report from the Corporate Director of Finance and Resources on Brent's overall financial position. Detailed information was provided regarding the financial outturn position for 2022/23, the Q1 financial forecast for 2023/24, and the medium-term financial outlook. Based on budget assumptions, the report highlighted the uncertainties and risks with regards to budget setting for years 2024/25 and 2025/26. These relate to factors such as high levels of inflation, rising interest rates, increased demand for key services, and uncertainty in central government funding. Looking ahead to 2024/25 and 2025/26, besides general inflation, pay awards and contractual indexation, it was stressed that it was imperative for the Council to provide growth for unavoidable demographic and demand-led service pressures. Thus, the current working assumption is that £8m worth of savings would need to be made over years 2024/25 and 2025/26 in addition to the £4.5m of 2023/24 savings carried into 2024/25 to enable the Council to set a balanced budget as required by law. At the end of the discussion, the Committee proposed priority protection areas for the upcoming two-year draft budget (2024/25 and 2025/26), and made the following recommendations and suggestions for improvement:

Recommendations to Cabinet

1. Continue to lobby central government for additional 'levelling up' investment in Brent to offset the impact of future budget proposals.
2. Invite the scrutiny chairs to informal cabinet meetings (as appropriate) when budget challenges/complexities (and any other relevant matters) arise.

Suggestions for improvement made to Finance & Resources

1. Provide benchmarking data to accompany figures/statistics provided in all future scrutiny committee reports.
2. Draft future scrutiny committee reports in lay man language, avoiding jargon where possible.
3. In relation to the development of the Council's Budget for 2024/25, and 2025/26:

- a. Ensure that each budget proposal is categorised as one of: Cut; Income generation; Service transformation; Efficiency; or Investment for transparency purposes. This language should also be used in Council communications in order for residents to distinguish between the proposals which are cuts/service reductions, those which are investments, and those which are efficiencies/service transformation.
- b. Ensure that the Council's vision, mission, and strategic priorities (as outlined in the borough plan) are communicated clearly when consulting residents, partners, and businesses on the Draft Budget for 2024-25, and 2025-26. This should be inclusive of any current/planned activity to support the most vulnerable/marginalised residents in the borough.
- c. Explore further opportunities for investment/income generation to offset the impact that many of the upcoming proposals will have on vital council services.
- d. Set budgets based on realistic levels of growth in demand for services and inflation as well as realistic mitigations to contain overspends.

3.12. All suggestions for improvement have been accepted in full (please see Appendix 2); the Committee is awaiting full responses from the Cabinet on the recommendations made and will be able to update Full Council at the next meeting.

3.13. Members also received an update on the Shared Technology Services' (STS) operational performance and on the Council's progress in implementing the Brent and STS cyber security strategies. The Committee questioned the robustness of the cyber security training currently offered to members and staff, as well as the soundness of the Council's risk management plan and response/recovery plans should a successful cyber attack take place. This discussion involved delving into cyber security good practice and lessons learnt from successful cyber attacks at other local authorities. Additionally, the Committee questioned the effectiveness of processes/systems in place to ensure third party suppliers adhere to council cyber security standards and requirements. At the end of the discussion, the following suggestions for improvement were made, all of which have now received full responses from the relevant departments (please see Appendix 2):

1. Involve the Committee in testing the Council's cyber-resilience plans.
2. Deliver bespoke (in-person) cyber security training to all members in addition to the standard yearly training provided.
3. Improve internal and external communications, sharing more widely good practice studies relating to the Council's cyber security activities.

6 September 2023

- 3.14. Committee members agreed the establishment of a Scrutiny Budget Task and Finish Group, consisting of members from both the Resources and Public Realm and Community and Wellbeing committees, to review the Cabinet's budget proposals for 2024/25 and 2025/26. The confirmed members of the group are Councillor Rita Conneely (Chair of the Resources and Public Realm Committee), Councillor Ketan Sheth (Chair of the Community and Wellbeing Committee), Councillor Jayanti Patel, Councillor Anthony Molloy, and Councillor Tazi Smith. It was noted that the Task Group would bring an evidence-based recommendations report on the Cabinet's draft budget proposals to the Resources and Public Realm Committee meeting on 24 January 2024 to then be discussed and agreed by the Committee. A report from the Committee would then be presented to Cabinet for consideration in February 2024, alongside the report from the Corporate Director of Finance and Resources on final budget proposals for 2024/25 and 2025/26.
- 3.15. The Committee heard from the Cabinet member for Customers, Communities, and Culture, Councillor Fleur Donnelly-Jackson, and received a report from the Corporate Director of Communities and Regeneration on the development of a Community Engagement Framework. The Committee sought clarity on the proposed principles and themes that had been identified for the Framework, and questioned how and when the Framework would be embedded in Council operations. Members also raised concerns about the engagement planned (i.e. workshops) with external stakeholders, and whether this was representative enough of the diversity that existed in the borough. This led the Committee to question the outsourcing of the development of the Framework (including engagement) to a third-party organisation, based on the view that Brent officers knew the borough and our diverse communities better. Officers stressed that the list of stakeholders identified in the report was an initial list and would be added to significantly after consulting committee members on who they think should be engaged as part of the process. At the end of the discussion, the Committee made the following suggestions for improvement:
1. Revisit the current format of Brent Connects meetings; this should include a review of how agendas can be co-designed and driven by residents. Additionally, how the Council can address the gaps in engagement caused by the current geographical boundaries of Brent Connects areas. For instance, residents being assigned to areas which do not necessarily reflect what they consider their neighbourhoods.
 2. As an initial list, include the following groups in consultation and engagement activities:
 - a. Carers, including young carers
 - b. Young people
 - c. Brazilian communities
 - d. Goan communities
 - e. Any other emerging communities identified
 - f. Neighbourhood forums
 - g. Trade Unions (in line with HR compliance)

h. Businesses

3. Undertake a member survey to engage councillors on the development of the Framework, including stakeholders the Council should be engaging as part of this work.
 4. Pending the results of the survey suggested above, explore delivering a workshop to engage councillors on the development of the Framework, including stakeholders the Council should be engaging as part of this work.
 5. Work with departments to make improvements to Brent's online consultation platform and to the general approach to consultations:
 - a. Where residents are clearly informed of the timescales related to the initiatives/policies/strategies they are being consulted on and;
 - b. Where consultation feedback/results are made readily available to residents/partners in one central place.
 6. Liaise with the Local Government Association (LGA) and other relevant external bodies to identify good practice to inform the upcoming Community Engagement Framework.
 7. As far as possible, review Council documents (including the new Community Engagement Framework) for jargon and update accordingly.
- 3.16. Members also heard from the Cabinet member for Safer Communities and Public Protection, Councillor Harbi Farah, and received a report on Brent's Planning Enforcement process, including on how this area of work is resourced. The Committee's main concerns were around the heavy backlogs that existed within the service and the impact that this had on the resident experience. Members explored the issues causing backlogs in the service and questioned officers on the interventions in place to mitigate the impacts of such backlogs. The Committee also raised concerns around the lack of communication with residents during the planning enforcement process, specifically the failure to provide regular progress updates to residents with regards to the planning breaches they report. Members explained that this created a perception that no further action is taken when planning breaches are reported, creating a real risk of reputational harm for the Council. Officers appeased members' concerns, explaining the challenges of providing regular progress updates, and providing the Committee with detail on how residents' expectations relating to planning enforcement timescales/milestones are managed in the current process. At the end of the discussion, the following cabinet recommendations and suggestions for improvement were made:

Recommendations to Cabinet:

1. Work more closely with London Councils to identify effective ways of collecting/collating planning enforcement performance data from all London authorities; and to identify practical solutions to common challenges (e.g. backlogs).

Suggestions for improvement made to Communities & Regeneration

1. Where possible, include benchmarking data to accompany figures/statistics provided in all future scrutiny committee reports. In the absence of benchmarking data, provide context behind figures/data provided in reports e.g. percentages.
2. To avoid unnecessary back and forth dialogue between officers and residents, improve communications around the standard of evidence required to proceed with planning breach complaints. This should include public education, and improvements to the planning enforcement webpage including the reporting mechanism.
3. Review the effectiveness of the Planning Enforcement Investigation Guide to better manage residents' expectations of the planning enforcement process (e.g. providing clarity on planning enforcement timescales).
4. Undertake an audit to determine the wards with the highest amount of planning breach complaints, and the wards with the highest amount of enforcement activity. This intelligence should be used to develop a targeted strategy to prevent planning breaches e.g. targeted planning education and/or communications campaigns etc. The Audit should also categorise the types of breaches receiving enforcement notices.
5. Explore additional ways to increase staffing capacity in the Planning Enforcement team to address backlogs.

Next meeting: 7 November 2023

3.17. The next meeting of the Resources and Public Realm Committee will be held on 7 November 2023. As it currently stands, members will review the following papers:

1. Safer Brent Partnership Annual Report 2022/23
2. Complaints Annual Report 2022/23

4.0 Stakeholder and ward member consultation and engagement

4.1 Councillors will discuss this report at the Council meeting.

5.0 Financial Considerations

4.1 There are no financial considerations arising from this report.

6.0 Legal Considerations

6.1 There are no legal considerations arising from this report.

7.0 Equality, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI) Considerations

7.1 There are no EDI considerations arising from this report.

8.0 Climate Change and Environmental Considerations

8.1 There are no climate change and environmental considerations arising from this report.

9.0 Communication Considerations

9.1 There are no communication considerations arising from this report.

Report sign off:

Zahur Khan

Corporate Director, Communities
and Regeneration