

	<p align="center"><b>Full Council</b> 19 September 2024</p>
	<p align="center"><b>Report from the Corporate Director of Law &amp; Governance</b></p>
<p><b>Resources and Public Realm Committee Chair's Update Report</b></p>	

<b>Wards Affected:</b>	All
<b>Key or Non-Key Decision:</b>	Council
<b>Open or Part/Fully Exempt:</b> <small>(If exempt, please highlight relevant paragraph of Part 1, Schedule 12A of 1972 Local Government Act)</small>	Open
<b>List of Appendices:</b>	One Appendix 1: Resources & Public Realm Scrutiny Committee Work Programme 2024/25
<b>Background Papers:</b>	None
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**1.0 Executive Summary**

1.1 To present Full Council with progress updates on the activities of the Resources and Public Realm Committee since the last Full Council meeting held on 8 July 2024.

**2.0 Recommendation(s)**

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

### **3.0 Detail**

#### **3.1 Contribution to Borough Plan Priorities & Strategic Context**

3.1.1 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.

#### **3.2 Background**

3.2.1 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).

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

3.2.3 Brent Council Standing Orders allow for the chairs of the scrutiny committees to report to ordinary Council meetings on the activities of their committees<sup>1</sup>.

##### The Resources and Public Realm Scrutiny Committee

3.2.4 The remit of the Resources and Public Realm Scrutiny Committee is set out in the Council Constitution under the Terms of Reference for scrutiny committees<sup>2</sup>. 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.*

3.2.5 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.

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<sup>1</sup> Brent Council Constitution, Part 2, paragraph 36.

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

<sup>2</sup> Brent Council Constitution Part 4.

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

3.2.6 Since the last update to Full Council on 8 July 2024 the Resources and Public Realm Scrutiny Committee has met two times (17 July 2024, and 4 September 2024).

17 July 2024

3.2.7 The Committee heard from the Deputy Leader and Cabinet member for Finances & Reform, Councillor Mili Patel, and received a report from the Corporate Director of Finance & Resources on Brent's overall financial position, examining the financial outturn position for 2023/24, the Q1 financial forecast for 2024/25 and the medium-term financial outlook. It was reiterated that the Council continues to operate in a challenging financial environment with an uncertain funding outlook (e.g. lack of clarity around long-term funding for social care) and the potential for significant spending pressures in demand-led services such as social care and homelessness. Despite incorporating growth into the medium term financial strategy to help alleviate some of these pressures, it was noted that the Council is unable to avoid making significant savings over the next few years to deliver a balanced budget. Members questioned how close the authority was to s.114 territory, and separately asked for comment on the healthiness of reserves in dealing with the current financial situation. Discussions also covered the robustness of budget assumptions, the Budget Assurance Panel's role in temperature checking financial forecasts, significant overspends in areas such as Housing, and Care, Health, and Wellbeing (and mitigations in place), the management of the Dedicated School Grant (DSG) legacy deficit, social worker recruitment and retention, poor Council Tax and Business Rates collection rates, and grant funding.

3.2.8 In light of the discussion, the Committee made the following Cabinet recommendations and suggestions for improvement to council departments:

Recommendations to Cabinet:

1. Lobby central government to end the privatisation of Children's social care services.
2. As part of work with London Councils, lobby for a greater co-ordinated approach between local authorities in the commissioning of services that curbs profiteering by private companies, creates new insourcing opportunities, enables mission-led procurement outcomes, and that delivers greater cost efficiencies overall.
3. Continue lobbying efforts for the urgent reform of local government finance that provides local authorities with greater options for how they raise and spend their resources (e.g. fiscal devolution options leading to more freedoms over local revenues such as 100% business rates retention and flexible use/spend of community infrastructure levy (CIL) monies).

Suggestions for Improvement:

1. To address low collection rates, review relevant strategies for debt collection to ensure robust interventions are in place to target those evading Council Tax/Business Rates. This should also include a review of the protocol in place to engage local councillors and to utilise their local knowledge in identifying those avoiding the payment of council tax or business rates.

#### 4 September 2024

- 3.2.9 The scrutiny work programme for the 2024/25 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.
- 3.2.10 As part of the discussion, the Chair highlighted that the work programme would typically have been agreed in July, but due to the election, the process was delayed until the September meeting.
- 3.2.11 Committee members then agreed the establishment of the Budget Scrutiny Task Group to review the Cabinet's Draft Budget for 2025/26. It was noted that the full membership of the Task Group has yet to be finalised and will be confirmed in a future meeting. The Task Group is expected to present an evidence-based recommendations report on the Cabinet's Draft Budget to the Resources and Public Realm Committee at its meeting on 28 January 2025. Subject to approval, a report from the Committee will then be forwarded to Cabinet for consideration on Monday 10 February 2025, alongside the report from the Corporate Director of Finance and Resources on final budget proposals.
- 3.2.12 The Committee heard from the Leader of the Council, Councillor Muhammed Butt, and received a report from the Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods & Regeneration on the first year performance of the Grounds Maintenance Contract. Representatives from Continental Landscapes ('the contractor'), Brent Parks Forum, Friends of Gladstone Park, and Dollis Hill Copse (DHCG) were also in attendance to provide comments and insights on the report. The Committee examined the major differences between the new and old contracts and evaluated the improvements in the new contract. Members also reviewed key challenges in delivery, such as the inability of machinery to meet performance standards, assessed the effectiveness of mitigation measures, and investigated if the Council was incurring additional costs due to such challenges. Other key discussion areas included contract monitoring; IT-related issues and the accuracy of the performance data outlined in the report; as well as the need for better collaboration with community payback teams and park volunteer groups to tackle littering and fly-tipping.
- 3.2.13 In light of the discussion, the Committee made the following suggestions for improvement:
  1. Publish a user-friendly summary of the annual report for residents highlighting expected standards, performance, key

achievements, challenges and priorities of the Grounds Maintenance contract.

2. Improve coordination and scheduling between Continental Landscapes and Veolia for verge cutting and street cleansing operations across the borough.
3. Work more closely with probation and community payback teams to create a focused work programme for offenders, exploring opportunities for relevant training and skills development.
4. Enhance communication and collaboration with volunteer groups (e.g., Friends Of Park Groups, Thames 21, etc.)
5. Consider introducing larger and more varied bins in problem areas in parks/open spaces to reduce littering and fly-tipping.

3.2.14 The Committee proceeded to deliberate upon the matter of affordable housing delivery by i4B Holdings Ltd (i4B) and First Wave Housing Ltd, with the item introduced by the Leader of the Council and Peter Gadsdon, Director and Board Member of i4B/First Wave Housing Ltd. Members examined whether investing in i4B and First Wave Housing was financially sound, addressing the challenges highlighted in the report, such as the issues identified with financial controls and billing arrangements for the companies in an internal audit. Other lines of enquiry included whether there are further opportunities to enhance performance relative to strategic priorities, the unique benefits obtained that might not have been realised through in-house operations, and how profits from both i4B and First Wave Housing are reinvested.

3.2.15 In light of the discussion, the Committee made the following suggestions for improvement:

1. Explore further opportunities for i4B/First Wave Housing Ltd to reduce temporary accommodation costs and expand the supply of affordable housing in a sound yet non-risk adverse manner.
2. Consider revising the viability assessment criteria to account for factors like temporary accommodation cost avoidance in order to support the delivery of more affordable housing via i4B/First Wave Housing Ltd.
3. Explore carrying out targeted work to source/purchase specific properties for households wishing to downsize and relocate outside of the borough.
4. i4B/First Wave Housing directors to strengthen their oversight of policies and procedures to prevent a recurrence of the issues identified in the internal audit.

Next meeting: 5 November 2024

3.2.16 The next meeting of the Resources and Public Realm Committee will be held on 5 November 2024. As it currently stands, members will review the following items:

- Budget 2024/25: In-Year Monitoring Update
- Employment & Skills
- People Strategy (formerly known as Workforce Strategy)

#### **4.0 Stakeholder and ward member consultation and engagement**

4.1 Members of the Committee continue to be fully engaged in the development and delivery of the scrutiny work programme.

#### **5.0 Financial Considerations**

5.1 There are no financial considerations for the purposes of this report.

#### **6.0 Legal Considerations**

6.1 There are no legal considerations for the purposes of this report.

#### **7.0 Equity, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI) Considerations**

7.1 There are no EDI considerations for the purposes of this report.

#### **8.0 Climate Change and Environmental Considerations**

8.1 There are no climate change and environmental considerations for the purposes of this report.

#### **9.0 Communication Considerations**

9.1 There are no communication considerations for the purposes of this report.

**Report sign off:**

***Debra Norman***

Corporate Director, Law & Governance