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## **MINUTES OF THE RESOURCES AND PUBLIC REALM SCRUTINY COMMITTEE** **Tuesday 25 February 2025 at 6.00 pm**

PRESENT: Councillor Conneely (Chair), Councillor Kennelly (Vice-Chair) and Councillors, Moghaddam, S Butt, Dixon, Long, Maurice, Mitchell, and Molloy

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

Councillor Conneely (as Chair) welcomed members of the Scrutiny Committee to the meeting.

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Shah.

### **2. Declarations of interests**

There were no declarations of interest made during the meeting.

### **3. Minutes of the previous meeting**

It was RESOLVED that the minutes of the previous meeting held on Tuesday 28 January 2025 be approved as a correct record.

### **4. Matters arising (if any)**

There were no matters arising raised at the meeting.

### **5. Deputations (if any)**

No deputations were raised at the meeting.

### **6. Order of Business**

The Chair agreed to vary the order of business on the agenda to enable the Resources & Public Realm Scrutiny Committee Work Programme 2024-25 (Agenda Item 10) and Scrutiny Progress Update - Recommendations Tracker (Agenda Item 9) to be considered as the first main items of business on the agenda. The minutes therefore reflect the order in which the items were dealt with at the meeting.

### **7. Resources and Public Realm Scrutiny Committee Work Programme 2024/25**

The Committee received a report from the Deputy Director Democratic Services, which presented the 2024-25 work programme for the Resources & Public Realm Scrutiny Committee.

In considering the report, members were advised that the work programme had been developed to reflect a key change that the agenda item 'Community Wealth Building and Social Value' had been renamed to 'Commissioning, Procurement, Community Wealth Building, and Social Value.'

Having reviewed the proposed work programmed it was RESOLVED to note the Resources & Public Realm Scrutiny Committee work programme (as updated) for the 2024-25 Municipal Year.

## **8. Scrutiny Progress Update - Recommendations Tracker**

In relation to the Scrutiny Progress Update - Recommendations Tracker report, the Chair reported that updated responses had been received from the Neighbourhoods and Regeneration department. It was additionally noted that updated responses had been received from the Finance and Resource department.

## **9. Quarter 3 Financial Forecast 2024/25**

Councillor Mili Patel (Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance & Resources) was invited to introduce a report providing an overview of the financial forecasts for the general fund revenue budget, the Housing Revenue Account, the Dedicated Schools Grant, and the capital programme as of Quarter 3 for the financial year 2024/25. In presenting the report, members were advised that the forecast overspend stood at £17.6 million against the revenue budget, reflecting an increase of £2.8 million compared to the previous quarter. The primary area of overspend was identified within the housing service. It was noted that homelessness and temporary accommodation costs continued to rise, now reaching £15.2 million since the last quarter's forecast. Additional pressures had emerged within the Children and Young People Directorate and the Community and Health and Wellbeing Directorate. The Council had implemented several mitigation measures to control the overspend, with plans aiming to achieve in-year savings targets wherever possible. The current budget had additionally incorporated £8 million of savings agreed by the Full Council in February 2024, with the status of these savings detailed in Appendix A. Despite the Council's considerable efforts to manage its financial position, the wider economic context remained volatile, with small changes in demand disproportionately exacerbating financial pressures. This was particularly evident in the areas of children's social care and adult social care packages, both in terms of volume and complexity. Additionally, the costs associated with temporary accommodation and the loss of housing benefit subsidy from central government were highlighted. It was reiterated to the Committee that Brent was not unique in experiencing these financial pressures. Across London, the net deficit on homelessness services was projected at £101.5 million for 2024/25, higher than the previous year.

Having thanked Councillor Mili Patel for introducing the report, the Chair then moved on to invite questions and comments from the Committee in relation to the Quarter 3 Financial Forecast 2024/25, with the following comments and issues discussed:

- As an initial query, the Chair inquired whether there were any new concerns or serious risks to the Council that had not been discussed in depth over the past three to six months. Additionally, the Chair questioned if there were any measures being taken to reduce the deficits that were proving ineffective, indicating a potential shortage of viable options. In response, Councillor Mili Patel (Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance & Resources) acknowledged the emerging issues within social care, particularly in terms of

commissioning, which were on the rise. Minesh Patel (Corporate Director Finance and Resources) added that there were no additional risks beyond those already identified regarding Quarter 3 of 2024/25. The awareness of broader issues in the medium term was highlighted. It was noted that the financial forecast for 2025/26 presented significant challenges. The Committee was informed that the budget for the Full Council meeting on 27 February 2025, had been prepared, and updates on the medium-term financial strategy for the following three years had been provided. It was indicated that further challenges were anticipated to arise.

- With reference to paragraph 4.1.1, which highlighted a £1 million pressure on the strategic commissioning and capacity building budgets, marking an increase of £0.9 million since Quarter 2, members inquired whether it would be possible to improve forecasting models and early warning systems to better anticipate and manage fluctuations in home care demand moving forward. Rachel Crossley (Corporate Director Community Health and Wellbeing) affirmatively, stating that discussions had been ongoing across teams about moving to a more granular monthly forecasting model. The aim to transition to a monthly forecasting regime and to examine the root causes of fluctuations alongside savings was noted. It was acknowledged that current tracking of in-year pressures was inadequate and committed to implementing monthly forecasting going forward.
- Following up, members inquired whether there was any investment in preventative measures to reduce long-term reliance on home care. In response, Rachel Crossley (Corporate Director Community Health and Wellbeing) explained that work was being undertaken to rightsize care, particularly focusing on care packages that involved up to five hours a week. It was emphasised that such packages were largely about contact rather than care. The focus was on technological solutions for check-ins and supporting individuals through community offerings rather than home care. It was noted that the Council had a high number of placements in this area compared to other Councils and that efforts were being made to reduce home care interventions.
- The Chair raised questions around the role of the NHS in alleviating the financial pressures faced by the Council, particularly in relation to shared budgets. The Chair referenced previous Budget Task Group discussions concerning funds owed by the NHS and sought an update on progress made in recovering these funds. In response, Rachel Crossley (Corporate Director Community Health and Wellbeing) informed that consistency had been achieved in case-by-case management, and funds were beginning to be recovered. However, it was acknowledged that a few high-cost placements remained under debate. It was highlighted that the discharge funding moving into the Better Care Fund next year would enable more consistent planning. It was further mentioned that the challenge of pooling budgets with the NHS was largely due to their financial constraints, emphasising the importance of building relationships to ensure funds were allocated to teams that prevented hospital admissions. Optimism was expressed around increased efforts in admission avoidance.

- Additional questions were raised regarding the short-term and long-term targets set for reducing placement costs while ensuring high-quality care for children and young people. In response, Nigel Chapman (Corporate Director Children and Young People) addressed the targets for placement costs, focusing on supporting young people, particularly those who had left care. Targets aimed at transitioning young people from high-cost supported accommodation to more independent living arrangements were outlined. The importance of moving young people through the system at an appropriate pace rather than focusing solely on individual unit costs was also emphasised. Progress was reported in moving young people to less supported accommodation and successfully recouping local housing allowance, resulting in the post-18 provision being on budget or slightly underspent. It was further noted that independent fostering agency costs were also under budget. In continuing the response, Nigel Chapman identified residential children's home costs as the area under the most pressure, due to the high cost and low number of placements. The difficulty in predicting the number of children requiring residential care and the high demand for placements nationally was highlighted. The upcoming opening of a council-owned children's home, which would help manage costs and achieve savings targets starting next year was further mentioned. The importance of maintaining manageable numbers of children in care and managing demand effectively was also stressed. In concluding the response, Nigel Chapman noted the success in reducing the number of children in care to under 300, the lowest in over ten years, attributing this to early intervention and preservation of health services.
- Referring to paragraph 7.9.1, which stated that the revised budget for the schools project was set at £28.3 million, yet the current forecast had dropped to £20.7 million, reflecting a slippage of £7.9 million, members posed questions around the primary causes of these delays and the extent to which they were preventable. Additionally, members cited paragraph 7.9.3, highlighting communication challenges, and questioned how these issues had contributed to the slippage and what steps were being taken to improve coordination and ensure future projects remained on track and financially viable. In response, Minesh Patel (Corporate Director Finance and Resources) advised that the capital programme was managed within the Property Assets Department, overseen by Neil Martin, the Head of Service. It was noted that individual issues within the schools programme could have varied reasons. It was suggested that a written response be provided after the meeting to address the inquiry in detail. The Chair agreed to put forth an information request regarding this following the meeting.
- The Chair sought details around the projected estimates on the financial benefits of running a council-owned children's home, as well as ensuring high standards of care for young people through insourcing. In response, Nigel Chapman (Corporate Director Children and Young People) confirmed that modelling had been conducted and presented to the Cabinet for approval, resulting in the allocation of capital to build the children's home. It was reported that the latest estimates indicated that staffing costs and the cost of running the home were on track. Confidence was expressed that the provision would meet high standards, comparable to those in the private

sector. Interest was noted from council staff in joining the home, which was viewed positively.

- Reference was made to the table in paragraph 1.6 within the committee report, which indicated no overspend or underspend, while paragraph 1.5 stated there were pressures requiring budgetary savings. Clarification was sought around how councillors could find out what the specific cuts to services were, as these were not itemised. In response, Peter Gadson (Corporate Director Partnerships Housing and Resident Services) informed that the savings for 2024/25 were approximately £1 million in staffing, resulting from a recent restructure of the housing service. This restructure involved shifting from a centralised approach to a model where area tenancy managers (ATMs) were placed back on estates. The new structure included 26 ATMs, each responsible for 300 to 350 units, handling rent collection, tenant liaison, and other estate-related services. The savings referred to in the committee report were primarily achieved through this staff restructuring. The allocation of the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) budget, the impact of government rent increase caps, and the challenges of balancing the budget while meeting environmental targets were also highlighted.
- Following up, the Chair questioned tenants and leaseholders were informed of the cuts. In response, Peter Gadson (Corporate Director Partnerships Housing and Resident Services) explained that rent setting consultations were a statutory requirement. Tenant engagement had been conducted over the summer on estates, discussing service limitations. Additionally, building safety regulator requirements necessitated engagement in larger blocks. A recent tenant and leaseholder event in the Grand Hall had over 500 attendees, addressing concerns, primarily around repairs.
- The Chair (as a request arising from the discussion) recommended that housing teams enhance their support for Tenants and Residents Associations (TRAs), which should include, but not be limited to, providing suitable arrangements for their meetings and ensuring that TRAs can operate efficiently. Given the crucial role of TRAs in receiving feedback from tenants and the importance of tenant and leaseholder involvement in discussions, it was felt that housing teams should further contribute to improved communication and engagement with tenants and leaseholders. In response, Peter Gadson (Corporate Director Partnerships Housing and Resident Services) agreed that supporting TRAs was important. It was noted with interest that a new Tenant Engagement Strategy had been agreed upon, and the Tenant Engagement Service would be moving back into the Housing department from Regeneration and Environment, as of 01 April 2025. Optimism was expressed that this change would improve the process.
- Members commented on the issue of temporary accommodation, noting that such accommodations often consisted of rundown houses classified as hotels, charging exorbitant rents for rooms that were sometimes rat and mouse infested and entirely unsuitable. Deep concern was expressed that this was unfair to tenants, the council, and council taxpayers, and called for measures to stop this practice.

- As a further issue highlighted, members inquired about the identification of an emerging risk associated with supported accommodation, initially estimated at £6 to £9 million, and questioned if this figure had changed. In response, Minesh Patel (Corporate Director Finance and Resources) confirmed that the current forecast for the end of the year was approximately £4.5 million. It was explained that initial forecasts were based on worst-case scenarios, but as more information became available and schemes stabilised, the figures were adjusted accordingly. Additionally, Laurence Coaker (Director Housing Needs and Support) addressed the standard of temporary accommodation, noting that Brent was part of a London Council Scheme called Setting the Standard, which involved an inspection regime grading properties from A to E. Properties graded D or E were not used, and enforcement actions were taken against unsuitable providers. Regarding supported exempt accommodation, it a two-pronged approach was explained involving both providers and tenants. Efforts were made to tighten the criteria for new providers joining the exempt accommodation status, and better data was obtained to identify providers abusing the system. Meetings were arranged with identified providers causing the majority of subsidy loss to address the support they were providing. Furthermore, assessments were conducted to determine the ongoing support needs of individuals in such accommodations.
- The Chair sought details around the capacity to enforce standards and prevent the identified providers from applying for additional rent money if the provision was not fit for purpose. In response, Laurence Coaker (Director Housing Needs and Support) clarified that the identified providers were not necessarily failing to provide support but were causing the most subsidy loss. Upcoming legislation that would introduce a licensing scheme for providers, ensuring regulation and appropriate inspections was also highlighted.
- Views were sought around the confidence in the placement of individuals into supported exempt accommodations, given the pressures on placements and housing. The Chair questioned whether these individuals would have been placed in commissioned services under better circumstances, but due to current demand, they were being placed in supported exempt accommodations, which at least offered some form of rolling support. In response, Laurence Coaker (Director Housing Needs and Support) conveyed that the majority of these placements were not made by the Council but by voluntary sector organisations. Individuals often approached organisations like Crisis for housing support, and Crisis officers sourced the supported exempt accommodation themselves. Part of the review process would involve meeting with voluntary sector partners to discuss the criteria they applied when identifying the support needs of individuals.
- Members inquired whether Brent could reclaim funds if providers were found to be overcharging for services in relation to both supported exempt accommodation and temporary accommodation. In response, Laurence Coaker (Director Housing Needs and Support) comprehensively explained that regarding temporary accommodation, reclaiming money was not possible as placements were made at agreed prices due to the need for accommodation. Concerning supported exempt accommodation, the

situation was similar, as prices were agreed upon by housing benefit or the rent officer, and referrals were made at those agreed prices by various organisations, including other Councils and voluntary sector organisations.

- As a separate issue, members questioned whether properties were inspected prior to individuals moving into them. In response, Laurence Coaker (Director Housing Needs and Support) confirmed that properties were inspected for temporary accommodation but not for supported exempt accommodation. It was noted that upcoming legislation would introduce regulations for exempt accommodation providers.
- Clarification was sought around the criteria used to assess temporary accommodation properties. In response, Peter Gadson (Corporate Director Partnerships Housing and Resident Services) explained that 15 years ago, Supporting People funds were used to commission supported accommodation. For individuals with chaotic behaviour who would not meet the statutory homelessness duty, these individuals might be placed by organisations like Crisis, receiving limited support that qualified them for exemption from Local Housing Allowance (LHA) and higher rents. The Council funded this amount, as the government did not cover it. It was additionally noted that legislation introduced nearly two years ago had not yet been implemented but was now under consultation. Once enacted, it would provide a framework for managing these placements properly.
- The Chair highlighted concerns regarding the ongoing issue of the subsidy gap in housing-related expenditures, and questioned whether there was any indication that this gap would be addressed, allowing Councils to reclaim the full amount of money spent, rather than having to cover the shortfall. Laurence Coaker (Director Housing Needs and Support) responded that it was highly unlikely that the subsidy gap would be fully addressed. It was noted that extensive lobbying efforts were being made through London Councils, the Greater London Authority (GLA), and various advocacy groups to highlight this issue to central government. Despite these efforts and revisions to the Local Housing Allowance (LHA) a few years ago, doubt was expressed that the government would resolve the subsidy gap. The Committee was assured that lobbying efforts would continue.
- The Chair additionally raised concerns about void management in Council properties, noting that despite reports of year-on-year improvements, there were still properties left unused for extended periods. The Chair cited anecdotal evidence from Councillors in various wards, including their own, about properties void for up to five years. The Chair questioned why properties were still falling through the gaps and emphasised the importance of prioritising void management and turnover. In addressing the concerns raised, Peter Gadson (Corporate Director Partnerships Housing and Resident Services) acknowledged the issue and requested specific addresses of properties that had been void for extended periods to follow up on them. It was explained that long-term voids were often due to structural problems, insurance issues, or other significant obstacles. It was noted that efforts had been made to reduce the number of long-term voids. Issues with general voids, such as absconding tenants or those handing in keys, and identified inefficiencies in the initial stages of void management was also

highlighted. It was further mentioned that the centralisation of teams had led to too many handoffs, causing properties to be lost in the system. The introduction of Area Tenancy Managers (ATMs) responsible for 350 units each was intended to improve void management. The challenges with squatting in void properties, which prolonged the void period was further noted. Members were also reassured that rent loss was decreasing each year, although it remained higher than desired.

- Members acknowledged the success of the I4B initiative in remaining self-financing and delivering over £4 million in annual savings on temporary accommodation costs, and inquired whether this success justified an expansion of the program and asked about other similar cost-saving measures being pursued. In response, Peter Gadson (Corporate Director Partnerships Housing and Resident Services) registered an interest in the question, noting his current role as a Director of I4B and First Wave Housing, along with Councillor Muhammed Butt. It was explained that a prudent approach had been taken with the companies, avoiding significant developer risk. Dissimilar to places such as Croydon and Brick by Brick, which borrowed heavily to buy and develop properties, I4B operated on a turnkey basis, purchasing properties and quickly turning them around for rental. This approach ensured financial stability. Limitations due to the rent charged, which was based on Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates, and the need to cover all expenses over the 50-year business plan while still turning a profit was highlighted. Market conditions affected by high interest rates and potential opportunities with developers looking to offload turnkey properties was further mentioned. Upcoming acquisitions and ongoing efforts to identify opportunities within the constraints of the business model was also highlighted.
- As a final point, Chair inquired about concerns regarding the Council's underperformance in recycling and its financial impact, to which Minesh Patel (Corporate Director Finance and Resources) expressed significant concern around the financial pressures caused by underperformance in recycling. The Chair requested that Alice Lester (Corporate Director Neighbourhoods and Regeneration) address the Committee on the issue of recycling during the next financial report presentation, with the medium-term strategy, in light of its importance to the budget.

In seeking to bring consideration of the item to a close, the Chair thanked officers and members for their contributions towards scrutiny of the Quarter 3 Financial Forecast 2024/25 Report.

The Committee took the opportunity to thank Peter Gadson (Corporate Director of Partnerships, Housing, and Resident Services) for his numerous contributions to the Resources and Public Realm Committee meetings, in light of his impending departure, and extended their best wishes for his future endeavours.

## **10. Commissioning, Procurement, Community Wealth-Building, and Social Value Report**

Councillor Rubin (Cabinet Member for Climate Action and Community Power) was invited to introduce a report providing an update on current procurement, strategic



commissioning and community wealth building and social value activity, as well as outlining planned next steps and opportunities in these areas. In presenting the report, members were advised that the paper detailed the current and proposed approaches to commissioning, procurement, community wealth building and social value. Councillor Rubin highlighted the fundamental principles of the commissioning approach, emphasising a focus on prevention. The objective was to transition from addressing issues at crisis points to implementing long-term preventative interventions. A comprehensive stream of work was underway, aimed at radical play space leadership, responding to issues where residents reside and addressing local needs. The Committee were informed that the Council had commissioned an external expert to undertake a review of procurement to provide a critical, friendly perspective on the Council's procurement practices. The report was scheduled for receipt on 15 March 2025 and the paper also suggested reporting back to the Committee on the implementation of the Action Plan. The priorities in procurement included an insourcing-first approach, as detailed in paragraph 5.32 of the committee report, to assess the feasibility of insourcing services when contracts and tenders came up for renewal. Additionally, the forthcoming Procurement Act 2023 that would come into effect in 2025 presented several opportunities outlined in the report. The approach to community wealth building, advocating for a shift from the current definition to a more exhaustive and extensive one was also highlighted. This approach aimed to transform economic development by retaining more wealth and opportunities for the benefit of local residents. The five pillars of community wealth building were delineated in paragraph 5.30 within the committee report. Collaboration with the Centre for Local Economic Strategies was planned to review processes and develop an action plan for implementation. The concept of social value was also addressed, which involved looking beyond the financial cost of contracts to consider how commissioned and procured services could enhance the economic, social, and environmental well-being of the local area. Proposals for policy changes included adjustments to the threshold and weighting of social value in contracts. The necessity of robust governance and assurance oversight for effective implementation was also emphasised. The terms of reference for the current commissioning and procurement board were under review to enhance oversight and assurance and included the Lead Member's (Councillor Rubin) involvement, consideration of a Forward Plan for upcoming contracts, a enhanced process for insourcing services, a keen focus on contract management, and the assessment of social value for upcoming contracts, such as the South Kilburn development.

Having thanked Councillor Rubin for introducing the report, the Chair then moved on to invite questions and comments from the Committee in relation to the Commissioning, Procurement, Community Wealth-Building, and Social Value Report, with the following comments and issues discussed:

- Members requested a detailed breakdown of the Council's commissioning expenditure between the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) and, within the context of community wealth building, a breakdown between VCS, social enterprises, and private companies based in Brent, ideally those that paid their business rates in Brent, and private companies that were not based in Brent. In response, Councillor Rubin (Cabinet Member for Climate Action and Community Power) acknowledged the information request and informed the Committee that a comprehensive review of procurement data had been undertaken. It was assured that the necessary data could be extracted.

Councillor Rubin further mentioned the consideration of local spend definitions and the possibility of including a breakdown in the report. Furthermore, plans to establish a reporting mechanism to the Cabinet, either on a six-monthly or twelve-monthly basis was highlighted, regarding commissioned and procured services.

- Following up, members questioned whether the commissioning process considered the component of local spend during price analysis, specifically considering the potential return of funds if services were awarded to companies based in Brent. In response, Rhodri Rowlands (Director of Strategic Commissioning and Capacity Building) confirmed that the analysis of wealth flows into the local community was an aspect being reviewed by the Centre for Local Economic Studies (CLES). Members were assured that this information could also be included in the information request. It was emphasised that this consideration was reflected in the price analysis during procurement. Willingness was expressed to share examples and include them within the information request. Councillor Rubin concurred and further added that the reporting and analysis of these components would be integrated into future commissioning processes.
- Member inquired about the new commissioning framework, specifically how it would strengthen the long-term stability of Brent-based charities. It was questioned whether contract allocations would prioritise local charities over those based externally and in other Boroughs, and whether this would be embedded into the procurement process to ensure financial stability moving forward, including covering ongoing operational costs and increased financial pressures. In response, Rhodri Rowlands (Director of Strategic Commissioning and Capacity Building) highlighted that the Council was exploring approaches to integrate into the commissioning framework that would enhance resilience across the sector. It was noted that future arrangements for the social infrastructure contract, currently provided by CVS Brent, would be one avenue. It was additionally stated that the Procurement Act 2023, which had recently come into force, provided mechanisms to promote opportunities for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) to bid for and benefit from Council commissioning contracts. The opportunity to further develop these mechanisms was emphasised, which would be a key tenet of the framework.
- Members sought clarification on how the Council would support ongoing costs for charities, given their reliance on these contracts to maintain services. Concern was expressed about ensuring the stability of services for residents amidst increasing costs, such as rents, energy, and staffing, while also protecting the Council's long-term position. The Chair also suggested considering the financial contributions of voluntary sector organisations that subsidised services provided on behalf of the Council through grants, funding, trusts, and donors. The Chair questioned how effectively the Council would take into account the financial income these organisations brought into the borough, which saved money for the Council, the NHS, and other statutory organisations. The Chair proposed using this financial value as part of the contract's financial assessment. In response, Rhodri Rowlands (Director of Strategic Commissioning and Capacity Building) noted the

increased flexibility provided by the Procurement Act 2023. It was explained that one of the significant changes was the shift towards reviewing bids and tenders based on the most advantageous tender rather than the most economically advantageous tender. The additional value brought by locally based organisations and their inherent relationships and connections were additionally highlighted. It was further mentioned that proposals to collaborate with the sector and others to attract additional social investment into the Borough, contributing to ongoing sustainability within the sector were underway.

- With reference to previous committee discussions about the percentage of Brent Council staff who were Brent residents, which was approximately 44%, the Chair inquired about the extent to which the Council considered organisations that paid business rates in Brent and employed staff who paid council tax in Brent as part of the social value framework. In response, Councillor Rubin (Cabinet Member for Climate Action and Community Power) affirmed the importance of examining the entire supply chain, including who commissioned organisations employed and where their money was subsequently spent. It was indicated that the CLES review would focus on wealth flows from the Council and the supply chain of commissioned organisations.
- Members inquired whether the changes introduced by the new Procurement Act would facilitate or hinder the ambitions outlined in the committee report, compared to the status quo. In response, Councillor Rubin (Cabinet Member for Climate Action and Community Power) conveyed that, in his view, the changes would facilitate their ambitions, as there was a greater emphasis on local expenditure. Rachel Crossley (Corporate Director Community Health and Wellbeing) concurred and further added that, from a corporate perspective, the requirement to publish an annual plan detailing upcoming procurements and the structure provided by the new Act would reinforce consistency in their approach. It was believed that the balance between structure and freedom was appropriate for their needs.
- Members expressed curiosity around the reliance on the local voluntary community centre in Brent, which was employed to assist in achieving key objectives in commissioning, community wealth building, and social value. Details were sought on the sector's capacity to meet these demands and how the Council was supporting the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) in addressing past delivery issue, given the challenges that had previously been faced. In response, Councillor Rubin (Cabinet Member for Climate Action and Community Power) informed the Committee that he had recently met with the new CEO of CVS Brent, who faced a significant task in turning the organisation around. Confidence was expressed in the CEO's capabilities and ideas. Intentions to set clear aims and convene a meeting of officers to discuss and clarify objectives were outlined. Councillor Rubin planned to meet with the CEO on a monthly basis to ensure that CVS Brent could be revitalised, and that capacity could be built within the voluntary sector in Brent. Rowlands (Director of Strategic Commissioning and Capacity Building) echoed Councillor Rubin's points and further highlighted that many of the proposals in their emergent thinking were informed by the VCS's engagement with the Council. The importance of building resilience and

capacity within the sector by understanding the needs of different organisations was emphasised. It was further mentioned that feedback received had indicated that social value commitments from supply chains did not always reach genuine community organisations and needs and thus, better brokering connections between suppliers and smaller community organisations to maximise impact had been proposed.

- The Chair cited a previous recommendation from the budget task group meeting regarding shared framework agreements with the voluntary sector to foster true partnership in delivering commissioning and procurement arrangements. The Chair noted that the voluntary sector in Brent had long requested such partnerships, which had been underutilised. Satisfaction was expressed that this was now a priority, as the recommendation had previously underperformed.
- Members welcomed the Commissioning, Procurement, Community Wealth-Building, and Social Value Report, Local Government Association (LGA), and the peer review. While it was acknowledged that the full peer review report was not due to be published until March 2025, members requested any early insights from the peer review regarding the work already undertaken, areas of strength and of weakness. In response, Councillor Rubin (Cabinet Member for Climate Action and Community Power) highlighted that in terms of areas of strength, the review found that the Council was particularly strong in data management, having the necessary data readily available. However, the need for more forward planning and a governance arrangement was noted to ensure that contracts were not addressed only a few months before their expiration. Rachel Crossley (Corporate Director Community Health and Wellbeing) additionally noted that, while the Council possessed the necessary tools and techniques, there was inconsistency in their application across services and procurement. Feedback had indicated a lack of clarity regarding responsibilities and accountability, with some perceiving procurement as solely a procurement role rather than a service-driven approach to achieve better value. The need for cultural change, consistency, and forward planning were also highlighted in the corporate peer challenge.
- Member inquired whether the new procurement strategy would encompass roles and responsibilities, governance, and cultural setting, to which Rachel Crossley (Corporate Director Community Health and Wellbeing) confirmed that the officer structures were being reviewed in line with the structural changes to governance outlined by Councillor Rubin. Ongoing work to adopt a community of practice approach across services, focusing on upskilling officers and clarifying roles and responsibilities was further highlighted.
- Members questioned whether the new Procurement Act 2023, while strategically beneficial, would require additional resources from the Council for flexible procedures and market engagement. In response, Rhodri Rowlands (Director of Strategic Commissioning and Capacity Building) reassured members that the Council was prepared for the forthcoming Procurement Act, with preparations having been underway for some time. An officer implementation group had been driving the process forward. On 24 February 2025, the Council's senior management group was briefed on the

implications and opportunities of the Act. The importance of consistent planning, the annual procurement plan, and the activity pipeline was emphasised. The opportunities presented by the social value aspects of the Act, particularly in tailoring contractual opportunities to maximise value were also highlighted. Confidence was expressed that the Council was on track to achieve the best value through consistent planning and trained officers.

- Reference was made to paragraphs 5.32 and 5.33 of the committee report, with members seeking details on how the Council determined whether a service should be outsourced or brought in-house, the criteria used to evaluate the cost-effectiveness and social impact of each approach, and how the review would enable greater consideration of insourcing. In response, Councillor Rubin (Cabinet Member for Climate Action and Community Power) stated that the current approach reassured that insourcing was considered when contracts were procured. The importance of having the pipeline of contracts presented to the Cabinet, as done by other local authorities, to ensure public scrutiny and oversight was emphasised. It was assured that insourcing was a priority and that the Commissioning and Procurement Board would assess and discuss the best way to commission services, whether through insourcing, outsourcing, or a combination approach.
- Members highlighted the challenge of considering insourcing as a vital selection ahead of procurement, noting the need for substantial lead time to plan effectively and questioned whether that motivated treating insourcing as a standalone approach to be considered on an annual basis or years before contracts were due for procurement, rather than adhering to the normal schedule. In response, Councillor Rubin (Cabinet Member for Climate Action and Community Power) affirmed that greater time for planning would enable better decision-making regarding the best approach for residents and cost-effectiveness for the Council. The importance of having a governance arrangement that allowed for long-term horizon scanning was also emphasised. The Chair recommended making it clear that insourcing was an option actively pursued by the Council. It was believed that this would strengthen the Council's negotiating position with suppliers, as the possibility of bringing services in-house would prompt suppliers to offer more competitive terms. The Chair also stressed the importance of transparency for residents to understand the decision-making process.
- Details were sought around whether the Council was exploring partnerships with other local authorities to enhance procurement efficiency, reduce costs, and strengthen social value outcomes by leveraging collective buying power, sharing best practices, and supporting local suppliers across multiple Boroughs. In response, Councillor Rubin (Cabinet Member for Climate Action and Community Power) acknowledged that the Council had already collaborated with other Councils in certain areas, such as the West London Waste Authority, which addressed significant aspects of waste and recycling. It was affirmed that while such partnerships were beneficial, they also carried risks, particularly when administrations changed and the adoption of different approaches. It was agreed that exploring these partnerships was worthwhile but needed to be approached with caution, considering the risks.

- Members raised questions around the relaxation of due diligence requirements for local SMEs. In response, Rhodri Rowlands (Director of Strategic Commissioning and Capacity Building) explained that the Procurement Act provided mechanisms to support local SMEs by reducing burdens and promoting opportunities. Ongoing initiatives were highlighted, such as the upcoming business forum in March 2025, which aimed to upskill and support smaller SMEs to better position them to bid for and win Council contracts. The importance of fairness and transparency in the approach was emphasised and various platforms and tools, such as the e-tendering portal and Match My Project were cited, which facilitated supplier engagement and project matching. Members were assured that efforts were being made to encourage local suppliers to register their interest and participate in Council procurement opportunities.
- Member noted a lack of clarity in the Commissioning, Procurement, Community Wealth-Building, and Social Value report regarding the concepts of social value and community wealth building and sought clarification on how these concepts, along with procurement, were integrated to deliver value in the community. In response, Councillor Rubin (Cabinet Member for Climate Action and Community Power) appreciated the report feedback and agreed to clarify how these concepts interrelated. It was explained that community wealth building was the overarching strategy, with procurement and social value being integral parts within the strategy. The aim was to enhance the local economy by ensuring that spending contributed to community wealth.
- The Chair reiterated the importance of understanding that community wealth building extended beyond the charity sector's investment through social value, and emphasised that every contract commissioned or procured by the Council should contribute to bringing wealth into the Borough, benefiting local businesses and residents. The Chair stressed the need for clear communication of this commitment.
- Members were keen to seek details on how the community wealth building approach would support residents in reducing their cost of living by increasing access to fair and ethical financial services. Members additionally highlighted the role of credit unions in financial resilience and questioned whether the Council could do more to promote and support their use among residents and Brent's own employees. In response, Councillor Rubin (Cabinet Member for Climate Action and Community Power) affirmed that this was an area that could be further explored. It was suggested that the Council could work with the Centre for Local Economic Studies during the Community Wealth Building Review to examine the role of credit unions and their integration into the strategy. Following up, members asked whether the check-off facility could be promoted more among staff, noting that there was a credit union eager for its promotion, but the Council had not actively promoted it, to which Councillor Rubin committed to investigating this matter further.
- Questions were raised around whether the Council had conducted an analysis of the social value commitments made by suppliers and followed up

on their impact and implementation. In response, Councillor Rubin (Cabinet Member for Climate Action and Community Power) indicated that the procurement team would be best placed to answer this query comprehensively but acknowledged that while some assessments had been undertaken, the new governance arrangements aimed to enhance contract management and accountability for social value commitments. In continuing the response, Rhodri Rowlands (Director of Strategic Commissioning and Capacity Building) added that monitoring and tracking the delivery of social value commitments was currently inconsistent. It was mentioned that mechanisms were in place, such as data dashboards, which showed over £3.4 million in equivalent financial value of contracted social commitments for the current financial year. The need for further meaningful visibility of the impact and delivery of the commitments, and the priority of greater monitoring was additionally emphasised.

- Members requested further information on the Council's current policy regarding social value. In response, Rhodri Rowlands (Director of Strategic Commissioning and Capacity Building) comprehensively explained that the Council's social value policy set out the overarching framework and linked to the corporate plan and priorities. The performance measures and key performance indicators (KPIs) used to support employment, skills development, community events, volunteering, and other contributions were also described. It was further noted that while tools and levers were in place to maximise opportunities around social value, there was a need for more consistent use and a refresh to ensure alignment with community needs and priorities.
- Members additionally questioned whether the input from the peer review would sufficiently focus on social value to identify gaps, weaknesses, and areas for improvement. In response, Rhodri Rowlands (Director of Strategic Commissioning and Capacity Building) expressed confidence that the combination of feedback from the sector social value network and the peer review would help the Council advance its social value strategy. The importance of consistency in driving improvements was highlighted and existing examples of successful social value delivery were noted. In acknowledgement of the response provided, members emphasised the importance of using social value strategically to maximise benefits from suppliers and also reiterated the significance of integrating spend thresholds and categories of spend into the new social value strategy to tailor requirements for different suppliers.
- The Chair acknowledged the difficulty in monitoring and evaluating the impact of social value offers within the current arrangements and suggested that moving towards more tangible social value contributions, such as direct investment in services or organisations providing services on behalf of the Council could be beneficial. The Chair was keen to seek details around whether teams had the capacity to establish specific targets in future social value negotiations. In response, Councillor Rubin (Cabinet Member for Climate Action and Community Power) agreed that social value should not be a form of corporate PR and acknowledged the complexity of requesting cash contributions, as it could affect the price paid for services. Reference was made to the Community Chest initiative, which allocated approximately

£100,000 for voluntary sector support, as a successful example of cash-based social value input. A preference was expressed for a single Brent community fund and the importance of jobs and apprenticeships for local residents was emphasised. The Chair stressed the need for effective follow-through on apprenticeship provisions and suggested partnering with local employment organisations, such as Brent Works, to prioritise offering apprenticeships to local residents. In addressing the Chair's remarks, Councillor Rubin confirmed plans to address contract management of social value and cited examples of successful practices, such as the collaboration with Wates to advertise apprenticeships through Brent Works. There was a commitment to monitoring these initiatives at a high level and incorporating them into the Commissioning Board's priorities.

- Members raised questions regarding the Council's support for fair trade and its integration into the new social value contract, noting the lack of fair-trade considerations in existing catering contracts. In response, Councillor Rubin (Cabinet Member for Climate Action and Community Power) expressed openness to incorporating fair trade into both social value and procurement strategies and invited further discussion regarding its integration, specifically with regards to social value.
- Concerns were highlighted regarding the underutilisation of several newly built community centres, with members questioning the possibility of exploring the inclusion of a Key Performance Indicator (KPI) in contracts to specify the number of hours these centres should be available for public use, to prevent them from remaining empty and unbeneficial. In response, Councillor Rubin (Cabinet Member for Climate Action and Community Power) acknowledged the importance of asset utilisation as one of the five pillars of community wealth building and agreed that this was an area that needed to be addressed to drive wealth and uplift the local economy. Rachel Crossley (Corporate Director Community Health and Wellbeing) further noted that though the issue pertained more closely to property and assets management, there was a commitment to review whether it was a contracting issue or a matter of working with stakeholders to better utilise the spaces. The connectedness to social value in understanding the usage of these buildings was emphasised.
- Members inquired about the financial savings and social value generated by the market rent policy for affordable rents for charities in the Borough, and questioned the factors considered when setting market rent reductions, such as whether a staggered system based on proven social value would be implemented, as opposed to a one-size-fits-all approach. Rhodri Rowlands (Director of Strategic Commissioning and Capacity Building) informed the Committee that a set of criteria was being piloted to determine market rent reductions and proposed to take this inquiry as an information request and provide further details in an information note. Councillor Mili Patel (Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance & Resources) agreed to share the scoring system used to evaluate the value of social contributions.

In seeking to bring consideration of the item to a close, the Chair thanked officers and members for their contributions towards scrutiny of the Commissioning, Procurement, Community Wealth-Building, and Social Value Report. As a result of



the outcome of the discussion, the suggestions for improvement and requests for additional information identified were AGREED as follows:

### **SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT**

- (1) Upon completion, sight the Committee on the draft Corporate Social Benefits Assessment Methodology for feedback.
- (2) Upon completion, publish the final Corporate Social Benefits Assessment Methodology for the benefit of residents, businesses, and community organisations.
- (3) Engage residents in understanding community wealth building and social value, highlighting their key roles in council activities, particularly in procurement and commissioning.
- (4) Revise the official council report template to include dedicated sections for Community Wealth Building and Social Value Considerations, ensuring these factors are assessed and reported in all council reports where relevant.
- (5) Explore how credit unions and the promotion of their services can be embedded within Community Wealth Building initiatives to strengthen financial inclusion, enhance local economic resilience, and provide greater support for residents.
- (6) Develop a robust, systematic approach to reviewing service contracts that enables transparent, evidence-based decisions on preferred forms of delivery (e.g., in-house, outsourced, or hybrid), guided by defined criteria, detailed cost-benefit analysis, and internal capability assessments.
- (7) Promote and support the long-term sustainability of voluntary and charity sector (VCS) organisations in the council's revised commissioning and procurement frameworks, where legally permissible. This should include a focus on removing and/or reducing barriers to VCS organisations participating in council tender activities.
- (8) Subject to risk analysis, explore additional joint procurement opportunities with neighbouring boroughs to leverage collective buying power, share best practices, and support local suppliers across multiple boroughs.
- (9) Continue to adopt and embed across all procurement and social value activity sustainability commitments, including fair trade and efforts to combat climate change.
- (10) Explore including clauses in all future procurement tenders requiring suppliers to demonstrate proactive steps to ensure transparency, compliance, and accountability in operations. This should include a commitment to respecting and upholding workers' rights to join trade unions, where applicable.

- (11) Where legally permissible, acknowledge and incorporate external financial contributions secured by VCS organisations that are linked to the tender into procurement evaluations, ensuring these funds are recognised as part of social value and community wealth building.
- (12) Explore integrating factors such as organisations whose staff pay council tax and those paying business rates within the borough into the social value and community wealth building criteria for procurement evaluations, where legally permissible.
- (13) Where practicable, ensure procurement contracts include tailored social value commitments, encouraging bidders to shift from 'in-kind agreements' to direct investments in existing or planned council-led initiatives that deliver tangible benefits to local communities.
- (14) Strengthen collaboration between suppliers and Brent Works and Employment Services Team to actively facilitate the targeted recruitment of local and underrepresented residents into job opportunities created through procurement.
- (15) Develop a publicly accessible contract performance dashboard to track and report on key metrics, including social value commitments, ensuring transparency and clear accountability for contract outcomes.

#### **INFORMATION REQUESTS**

- (1) Provide a detailed breakdown of commissioned services income received over the last three years, categorised by organisation type.
- (2) Provide a detailed breakdown of funding allocated to externally commissioned services, distinguishing between organisation types—private companies (small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and large enterprises/corporations), VCS organisations, and social enterprises—while also indicating whether each organisation is local or non-local.
- (3) Provide details, including examples, of how the council supports local SMEs in its procurement process.
- (4) Provide a copy of the Market Rent Reduction Framework, including the scoring criteria used to assess applications from VCS organisations seeking to rent council premises at reduced rates.

#### **11. Brent's Emerging Employment Strategy (2025-2030)**

Councillor Harbi Farah (Cabinet Member for Safer Communities, Jobs and Skills) was invited to introduce a report providing an overview of Brent's Draft Emerging Employment Strategy (2025-2030). In presenting the report, members were advised that the information provided detailed the draft Brent Employment Strategy 2025-2030 which aimed to create a more inclusive, dynamic, and resilient workforce by addressing key employment challenges and promoting sustainable career opportunities. The strategy aligned with Brent's local labour market, ensuring that residents—particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds—could access employment, apprenticeships, and skills development programmes. It leveraged

council influence through planning and procurement, strengthened partnerships, and supported residents in securing long-term, quality employment.

Alice Lester (Corporate Director Neighbourhoods and Regeneration) additionally outlined the objectives for the emerging strategy and emphasised the anticipated outcomes, acknowledging the challenges posed by factors beyond their control, such as the cost of childcare as a barrier to employment and changes to National Insurance. The importance of focusing on areas within their scope and the capacity to deliver within a small team was stressed.

Having thanked Councillor Harbi Farah for introducing the report, the Chair then moved on to invite questions and comments from the Committee in relation to Brent's Draft Emerging Employment Strategy (2025-2030), with the following comments and issues discussed:

- As an initial query, the Chair inquired about the impact of addressing childcare costs as a barrier to, and also questioned whether an impact analysis had been conducted to determine which barriers would yield the most significant return on investment. In response, Jon Cartwright (Head of Change and Customer Insight) responded that the barriers were identified through extensive data analysis and community engagement. The next step involved presenting these findings to a diverse group of stakeholders for prioritisation and testing of new approaches. It was noted that no analysis had been conducted on optimal resource allocation for tackling the barriers identified through the Outcome Based Review (OBR), but several projects that tested ways of addressing them were underway, including the opening of the new Horizon Centre in Roundwood and the testing of a 6-month membership model intended to increase work readiness of members. It was also mentioned that an impact analysis would be conducted after the first 6 to 8 months of testing.
- Members raised questions about opportunities within procurement processes to achieve employment outcomes and the extent of ongoing discussions on this matter. In response, Jon Cartwright (Head of Change and Customer Insight) explained that they were testing the market rent reduction framework for three assets – namely, Roy Smith House, Picture Palace, and the Civic Centre. The market rent reduction framework method statement was detailed, which included questions related to community value. Bidders were required to demonstrate alignment with the Borough Plan and deliver outcomes for local populations. The evaluation of bids for these assets included a focus on employment skills outcomes and moving people closer to the job market. Alice Lester (Corporate Director Neighbourhoods and Regeneration) added that the evaluation of bids included a detailed breakdown of the social value offer, with metrics on apprenticeships and job opportunities for under-represented groups, such as ex-offenders and unemployed young people. It was suggested that moving from actions to outcomes was an area for potential improvement in the social value sector.
- The Chair queried whether working alongside existing organisations in the Borough, such as PLIAS and Brent Works, would be more effective than relying on companies to advertise apprenticeships, and sought opinions on whether active mentoring and support would enhance effectiveness. In

response, Ala Uddin (Head of Employment Skills and Enterprise) confirmed that organisations already collaborated with Brent Works and further mentioned that developers had obligations under section 106 to recruit apprentices and employees. The direct work with suppliers and the support provided to meet job and apprenticeship requirements were also highlighted.

- The Chair expressed surprise at the low number of apprenticeships, noting that only 51 apprenticeships were available in the year, and not all were filled. Given the number of contracts and the 10% social value requirement, the Chair suggested that more apprenticeships should have been negotiated. In response, Jim Jessop (Employment Delivery Senior Manager) conveyed that the Council was proficient in delivering apprenticeships required via section 106 agreements. The need for a more robust approach to social value in procurement was emphasised. Subsequent to the meeting, Jim Jessop had since circulated additional information to provide further insight and context regarding the figures presented on the number of apprenticeships delivered by Brent Works. In clarifying the understanding, he informed that the figure of 51 represented the number of apprenticeships delivered year to date. The final outcome for the year was 61, with Brent Works delivering outcomes for over 95% of the apprenticeships offered. Apprenticeship volumes varied annually depending on the sites. At present, there were 20 active sites of significantly varying scales. Site reports could be provided to demonstrate that the sites were compliant with section 106 apprenticeship targets and that Brent Works was exceeding these targets in its delivery.
- The Chair inquired about the long-term objectives of the Stonebridge Outcome Based Reviews (OBR) and sought information on the implementation of pilot initiatives. In response, Jon Cartwright (Head of Change and Customer Insight) explained that OBRs focused on co-producing new solutions to cross-cutting issues and had been a transformation approach for 7 to 8 years. The long-term legacy of early OBRs, such as the Brent Hubs model and family wellbeing centres was highlighted. Current initiatives, including the new Horizon Centre in Roundwood and the market rent reduction framework being tested with three assets (Roy Smith House, Picture Palace, and the Civic Centre) was outlined. The potential for these models to expand and deliver significant outcomes was also noted.
- Members raised concerns about the job market's impact on young people, particularly post-Covid, and questioned changes in the Stonebridge area since the 2021 census. In response, Jon Cartwright (Head of Change and Customer Insight) stated that no like-for-like data was available since the census, but other datasets, such as Universal Credit and Jobseeker's Allowance claimants, were used to augment the data. Ongoing engagement activities and the forthcoming service-level data from the Horizon Centre to assess job and skills outcomes were also highlighted.
- Members inquired about the steps to ensure that engagement from the trial scheme reflected the diverse experiences of Brent residents, particularly in Stonebridge. In response, Jon Cartwright (Head of Change and Customer Insight) described the OBR approach, which began with a discovery phase

involving quantitative and qualitative data collection. Various community research methods, including pop-up events, conversations, and ethnographic interviews were detailed. The importance of synthesising this data and presenting it to stakeholders to develop solutions such as the new Horizon Centre and the market rent reduction approach was emphasised. Councillor Harbi Farah (Cabinet Member for Safer Communities, Jobs and Skills) provided assurance that further emphasis would be placed on engaging diverse communities, particularly in Stonebridge, to address issues of deprivation and low outcomes. The importance of working with familiar local organisations to maximise engagement was also highlighted.

- Following up, the Chair questioned the representation of the Irish Traveller community in the qualitative interviews and stakeholder group to which Jon Cartwright (Head of Change and Customer Insight) conceded that there had been no direct engagement with the Traveller community. The Chair highlighted that the lack of engagement with the Traveller community was a gap that needed to be addressed.
- Details were sought around the measures being taken to address barriers to employment, such as the costs of childcare and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), with members also questioning whether a broad approach would be taken to tackle all barriers to employment or if a more strategic focus on a specific group would be more effective. In response, Alice Lester (Corporate Director Neighbourhoods and Regeneration) noted that addressing the costs of childcare was not within their current scope due to the complexity and regulatory challenges involved. Supportive planning policies for proposed childcare facilities and the potential for incorporating childcare into social value could be explored, though this was not seen as a long-term solution. Regarding ESOL, it was highlighted that numerous courses were offered, with outreach efforts in various libraries. It was suggested that further discussions with the lead member were needed to determine whether to focus efforts on a particular group. Ala Uddin (Head of Employment Skills and Enterprise) added that 38% of the provision was dedicated to ESOL, both at the centre in Stonebridge and across 33 community centres. The significant need for ESOL and the capacity challenges faced were also highlighted. The use of grant money within Brent Start to provide childcare for ESOL students was further mentioned, though it was insufficient to cover all needs. Discussions ensued around exploring external funding, such as the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF), to potentially cover childcare costs for those seeking full employment. The importance of addressing key barriers, including language and health issues, and the approach of taking services to the community was emphasised. Jim Jessop (Employment Delivery Senior Manager) also informed the Committee about the upcoming childcare entitlement of 30 hours per child, effective from September 2025. Ongoing conversations with Early Years colleagues were had to leverage this entitlement to increase employment opportunities for residents. The need to prioritise efforts to achieve significant job outcomes was also acknowledged. Alice Lester (Head of Employment Skills and Enterprise) further noted that grants from the Greater London Authority (GLA) or the West London Alliance were typically targeted at specific groups identified as needing support. The limited availability of their own funding sources, aside from some UKSPF funding was further mentioned. Ala Uddin

(Head of Employment Skills and Enterprise) highlighted the work plan program initiated as part of the central government's White Paper, aimed at supporting individuals with learning difficulties or special needs. Reference was made to the 'Connect to Work' program, which assisted people with learning disabilities and special needs. The close collaboration with the West London Alliance (WLA) and the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to implement these programs effectively was also described.

- The Chair inquired whether the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) was an under-utilised source of funding that could assist organisations in the borough with their bids. In response, Jim Jessop (Employment Delivery Senior Manager) comprehensively explained that bids to DWP funding, or via their dynamic framework, required demonstrating that no other provision could deliver the equivalent service. Even then, bids competed with other organisations on the framework, often resulting in organisations from outside the Borough, such as Birmingham, winning the bids. Despite significant interest in the 'Connect to Work' funding, only three large prime organisations met the financial requirements, all of which were already operating in the Borough, unlike smaller local businesses.
- As a separate issue, members questioned whether public transport links were considered in relation to employment rates. In response, Alice Lester (Head of Employment Skills and Enterprise) informed that the Strategic Transport Team was responsible for examining connectivity in general, rather than specifically in relation to employment rates.
- Members highlighted a successful DWP-funded outreach scheme in Bolton Council, which operated at the Reebok Stadium, reducing barriers to engagement by being on-site, and suggested that similar initiatives could be implemented to ensure better high-paid opportunities in the Borough, particularly with organisations like Transport for London (TfL) and the public sector, which offered career and pay progression pathways. In continuing the line of questioning, the Chair acknowledged that housing costs were a significant barrier to employment and inquired whether residents were securing full-time, well-paid jobs through apprenticeships and the Council's relationships with employers. In response, Jim Jessop (Employment Delivery Senior Manager) stated that the Council had worked with employers across all pay levels, including higher-level apprenticeships. It was noted that the majority of apprenticeships now started at London Living Wage and extended to higher levels. Partnerships with large companies like HS2, which offered excellent progression schemes was further mentioned. It was acknowledged that there was a need for further analysis on apprenticeship progression. The Council's robust CRM tracking system, which monitored partnerships for a year, was also highlighted.
- Members sought details around the evolution of employment support at Roy Smith House, measurable outcomes in job placements and skills development, and the Council's efforts to ensure long-term effectiveness in addressing employment barriers. In response, Jon Cartwright (Head of Change and Customer Insight) advised that Roy Smith House was currently vacant and undergoing refit work for transformation into a usable community space, with completion expected in June or July 2025. The Chair expressed

anticipation for an update on the project six months after the refit work was completed.

- Members were also keen to seek details around how colleges and partner organisations were working with the Council to prioritise applications from residents in targeted areas within the Borough and underrepresented groups. In response, Jim Jessop (Employment Delivery Senior Manager) elucidated that the Council commissioned several voluntary sector organisations to work with specific areas of specialism. It was further mentioned that a consortium of providers had been targeting ethnic minority groups, particularly the Somali community, and a specialist provider for homeless and disabled individuals, focusing on mental health. The partnership with these organisations to provide access to job opportunities through Brent Works and other initiatives was also emphasised.
- As a further issue highlighted, members inquired about the specific training programs and courses currently available in Brent to address the national shortage of bricklayers. In response, Jim Jessop (Employment Delivery Senior Manager) noted that there were no specific programs for bricklayers at present. However, it was highlighted that sector-based work academy training programs were implemented when funding was available, and they collaborated with the local college, College of North West London, to address skill shortages. Jim Jessop agreed to investigate this further. In continuing the response, Ala Uddin (Head of Employment Skills and Enterprise) highlighted the strong relationship with the College of North West London, one of the most prominent colleges in the Borough. The investment in a Green Skills Centre, the first of its kind in London, providing specialist training resources for Brent residents was cited. It was noted that while data on achievement and work progression for the current year was not yet available, analysis would be conducted. It was explained that sector-based work academies offered tailored programs for specific jobs, such as retail or construction, guaranteeing interviews upon course completion. The ongoing collaboration between partners, the college, and Brent Works to support areas with skill shortages was emphasised. Further to this, Jim Jessop provided an example of the gas engineering bootcamp, which received substantial funding support and achieved an 80% completion rate, leading to high-value, well-paid careers for participants.
- The Chair posed questions around prioritising Stonebridge residents for employment opportunities and whether this was integrated with the Outcome Based Reviews (OBR) to target Stonebridge residents specifically. In response, Jim Jessop (Employment Delivery Senior Manager) explained that recruitment efforts involved the College of North West London, NHS, and Health Academy. Members heard that a mini jobs fair was held in Stonebridge, resulting in high engagement, with 26 attendees and many follow-up interviews. It was noted that outcomes were still pending though appeared promising.
- As a final query, the Chair questioned the effectiveness of advertising employment opportunities and whether one annual jobs fair was sufficient for the Brent Works offer. In response, Jim Jessop (Employment Delivery Senior Manager) detailed that the annual jobs fair was the Council's major event,

attracting over 8,000 attendees and resulting in 300 job placements. It was highlighted that the jobs fair was the largest in West London and the second largest in London. The partnership newsletter and the possibility of adding councillors to its distribution list and providing a link on the website would be explored.

The opportunity was also taken to highlight that the Employment and Skills Team would be transitioning to Housing Resident Services effective from 1 April 2025, with Kibibi Octave (Director Communities and Partnerships) being designated as the new relevant corporate director.

In seeking to bring consideration of the item to a close, the Chair thanked officers and members for their contributions towards scrutiny of Brent's Draft Emerging Employment Strategy (2025-2030). As a result of the outcome of the discussion, the suggestions for improvement and requests for additional information identified were AGREED as follows:

### **SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT:**

- (1) In developing the upcoming employment strategy, expand on the engagement from the Employment and Skills Outcome-Based Review (OBR) by strengthening outreach with underrepresented groups to ensure equitable outcomes.
- (2) Collaborate with Brent's procurement teams to integrate employment-related social value commitments into future tenders, encouraging suppliers to offer flexible employee packages that better support working parents.
- (3) Maximise the development of higher-paid job opportunities as a core objective of the upcoming employment strategy.
- (4) Enhance and diversify communication and engagement efforts to raise awareness of Employment and Skills support available in the borough, with a particular focus on promoting Brent Works services and the Work Well programme.

### **INFORMATION REQUESTS:**

- (1) Provide an update on the Roy Smith House initiative after its reopening, measuring its effectiveness in addressing the challenges outlined in the Stonebridge Outcome Based Review (OBR) and reviewing the outcomes of the council's Market Rent Reduction Framework.
- (2) Provide detail on any targeted training programmes in Brent to meet industry demands, particularly the national shortage of bricklayers.
- (3) Share data on the number and types of roles secured through training at the Green Skills Centre, facilitated by the partnership between the Council and the College of North West London.

## **12. Any other urgent business**



No items of urgent business were identified.

The meeting closed at 8:54pm.

COUNCILLOR RITA CONNEELY  
Chair

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