LONDON BOROUGH OF BRENT

MINUTES OF THE RESOURCES AND PUBLIC REALM SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
Held in the Conference Hall, Brent Civic Centre on 24 February 2026 at 6.00 pm

PRESENT: Councillor Conneely (Chair), Councillor Kennelly (Vice-Chair) and Councillors Dixon, Long, Maurice, Mitchell, Molloy and L. Smith

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 Councillors Saqib Butt.

2. Declarations of Interests

There were no declarations of interest made during the meeting.

3. Deputations (If Any)

Members were asked to note that a deputation had been received from a local resident, Ms Sarah Archer, in relation to fly tipping and, unless otherwise indicated, members were asked to allow the speaker up to 5 minutes to present their deputation.

Ms Archer began her presentation by explaining that she was speaking on behalf of the residents of Brondesbury Villas who were concerned about flytipping and litter. She had met with some committee members and worked closely with Brent's Waste Enforcement Team to raise this issue. In detailing the issues residents were experiencing, Ms Archer advised that Brondesbury Villas connected to Kilburn High Road and experienced a lot of waste from there. The location had two shops and a fruit stall which all attracted a lot of waste and litter.

She drew members attention to Brent's Street Cleaning Programme which used a grading system from A to D, with A being extremely clean and D being heavily littered, and advised that Brent's aim as outlined on the website was to keep streets to a minimum standard of at least B, which was mostly free from litter except for a few items. In considering the level of litter and waste on Brondesbury Villas, she advised that she would grade it a D, with litter in the gutters amassing every two weeks. As such, she was addressing the Committee with the aim of discussing how Brent could move to a place where the street cleaning programme brought more streets in line with their aim of a grade B.

In addition to the litter amassing on the streets from commercial businesses, she highlighted flooding as a result of clogged drains from litter and an increase in fast food containers being littered where the Electric Vehicle Charging Points were used. As there were no residential bins, Electric Vehicle owners were generating a lot of litter, and, although Veolia had started to place bin bags around trees and lampposts near Charging Point locations, these were often full quickly and she did not feel this was a long-term approach. In comparison, when she had visited the borough of Camden, she had noticed Enforcement Officers on the streets and residential bins available, as well as regular pavement washes which was not included in Brent's contract with Veolia.

Further adding to the condition of the street was 'charitable tipping', which she described as residents taking waste such as electrical goods, ironing boards and books out of their home and placing them on the public pavement for others to take instead of taking them to a charity shop or skip. When she had queried this, Waste Enforcement had confirmed that this type of behaviour met the legal threshold to be defined as a fly tip. In 2024, Brondesbury Villas had 63 incidents of this, increasing to 527 in 2025.

In summing up, she hoped the Committee would work with residents, the Waste Enforcement Team, and relevant contractors, to address the issues raised by residents living in Brondesbury Villas and more broadly improve the streets in Brent as a whole.

The Chair permitted members to asked some brief questions of the resident, with the following queries and responses made:

- The Committee asked whether there were particular locations of the road that the issue was particularly acute or any patterns that residents had noticed. Ms Archer advised that tipping was consistent throughout the road, and rubbish and littering was more prevalent closer to Kilburn High Road. There was a 10 metre area where all shop fronts on Kilburn High Road were swept daily, with waste evident just outside of that 10 metre area. Rubbish also was worse in the areas where the Electric Vehicle Charging Points and garages were.

- Councillor L. Smith advised that, as a ward councillor for that area, she had asked for additional patrols in the West end and whether a mobile camera could be placed there some of the time.

- The Committee asked whether residents in Brondesbury Villas were making use of the Fix My Street app to report fly tips and waste and what level of response they received. Ms Archer confirmed that residents did use the app to report waste and it was removed swiftly, which she felt contributed to the issue because the perpetrators knew that the waste would be removed immediately, reinforcing that behaviour.

As no further issues were raised, the Chair thanked Ms Archer for her presentation and answering the Committees questions and advised that officers may address some of her comments during the discussion on fly tipping and littering in Brent.

4. Minutes of the Previous Meeting

It was **RESOLVED** that the minutes of the previous meetings held on 21 January 2026 be approved as a correct record.

5. Matters Arising (If Any)

There were no matters arising raised at the meeting.

6. Fly Tipping and Littering in Brent

Councillor Krupa Sheth (Cabinet Member for Public Realm and Enforcement) was invited to introduce the report relating to fly tipping and litter in Brent, which reviewed the effectiveness, performance and future development of the Council's arrangements for preventing, reporting, enforcing and cleaning up fly tipping and littering in Brent. She reassured the Committee that the Council was aware of how important these issues were to both residents and councillors, and confirmed that the Council was working hard to address the issues, particularly with the introduction of the Don't Mess With Brent campaign, and was being as creative as possible in tackling fly tipping and littering in the borough.

In continuing the presentation, Jehan Weerasinghe (Corporate Director Neighbourhoods and Regeneration, Brent Council) began by addressing the comments made by the resident and committed to reviewing the issues and situation in that particular location. In highlighting the work of the Council to address fly tipping and littering in Brent, he advised that, in the current reporting year alone, reports had increased to more than 38,000 by January 2026, with Veolia as the contractor out-performing the target for response times and clearance rates at 98.95% compared to a target of 95%. As such, he felt that the report showed a picture of improvement, compared to several years ago when Brent had been regarded as one of the poorest performing boroughs in the country for fly-tipping. He felt there was now swift action, a robust and well-managed contract in place, and good working relationships with the contractor.

In responding to the deputation made by Ms Archer, Chris Whyte (Director of Public Realm, Brent Council) acknowledged that the issues she raised in that area were very common, attributing them to a consequence of the many pressures faced in the very busy urban environment in and around Kilburn High Road. He hoped that the scrutiny undertaken that evening would provide an insight into the work the Council and its contractors undertook to keep control of those issues and keep Brent in good condition. He then led introductions of those present, which included representatives from the Council's Waste Enforcement Team and representatives from Veolia.

Having thanked Councillor Sheth, Jehan Weerasinghe and Chris Whyte for introducing the report, the Chair then moved on to invite questions and comments from the Committee, with the following points raised:

- The Committee asked to what extent systemic factors, such as bulky waste accessibility, commercial waste and non-compliance, housing density, and limited waste storage solutions, contributed to flytipping and littering, and how the Council was addressing any underlying issues contributing to flytipping and littering. Chris Whyte (Director of Public Realm, Brent Council) advised that all of the factors listed would contribute to the level of dumping in the borough, and the duty on the Council was to help resolve some of those issues at the source, including by making the bulky waste service as accessible as possible, which he felt the Council did. In relation to provision for waste storage, there was very clear planning guidance requiring landlords and developers to make appropriate provision for waste storage and the Council could challenge where that was not happening in the right way. Councillor Sheth added that the community skips had also been introduced to alleviate some of those factors that contributed to dumping, and the Council was considering how that could be improved to make them even more convenient and accessible.

- In relation to bulky waste collection, which was a paid service allowing the collection of up to 5 bulky waste items, the Committee highlighted that many residents using that service often did not have 5 items, and therefore were less willing to the pay the same for the removal of only one item compared to 5 items. Rashmi Agarwal (Head of Service Development and Contracts Performance, Public Realm, Brent Council) responded that the service collected up to a maximum of 5 items, and agreed that data showed many people were usually disposing of 1-3 items. Some households came together to pay the fee for bulky waste collection with waste then collected across households, which was something that could be promoted. The Council was currently procuring a new contract for bulky waste and would keep the Committee updated on that procurement. This was a separate contract to the waste contract with Veolia, with the West London Waste Authority leading the procurement of that.

- In considering the new procurement for a bulky waste collection contract, the Committee asked whether the requirements of the contract would need to be replicated across all boroughs involved, or whether the Council had discretion to change the conditions so that residents could pay for the number of items that they were disposing of, instead of a blanket fee for up to 5 items. Chris Whyte advised that the Council could have bespoke arrangements with the provider, but highlighted that the fee should cover the cost of providing the collection and a single visit to the household, regardless of the number of items being collected. In response, the Committee asked what information officers were gathering to consider doing this differently. Officers highlighted that the bulky waste element was only one factor in flytipping and littering, but agreed that there was value in undertaking a cost-benefit analysis of providing a free bulky waste collection service compared to the cost of clearing the bulky waste, or a tiered approach based on the number of items for collection. He advised that the reason the Council originally moved away from providing free collection was due to the cost of the vehicles and staff required to do those collections, and the increase in demand for a free service. The waiting times for collection had been almost 8 weeks for a single item, which had now been reduced with the quality of service improved.

- The Committee asked what the Council was doing to improve waste storage inside properties, such as through planning enforcement for HMOs. Chris Whyte explained that where HMOs and other landlords were licensed, they were required to make appropriate arrangements for the storage and presentation of waste as a condition of their licence. An Enforcement Officer had recently been appointed with a specific focus on upholding those licence conditions, so where waste problems were emanating from a licenced property the Enforcement Officer could raise that directly with the tenants and landlords as necessary. In terms of the internal arrangements of waste storage within private dwellings, he advised that the instruction of that was beyond the Council, but the Council was clear on how that waste needed to be emptied, and the onus for that was on the tenants and landlords to ensure those arrangements were in place. Veolia also had a team responsible for educating tenants who may be disposing of waste incorrectly.

- Endorsing the appointment of an Enforcement Officer for licensed landlords, the Committee asked what more the Council could do so that landlords were not dumping mattresses for quick tenancy turnarounds. Dennis Lewis (Environmental Enforcement Manager, Brent Council) explained that NCIL funding had enabled the recruitment of the Enforcement Officer dedicated to licensing conditions related to waste, and other officers were also in post focused on other major licensing conditions such as mould. Housing was looking to contribute an officer to that team, as it was recognised that the waste issues emanating from HMOs specifically were contributing to flytipping and littering in the borough. he added that the appointed officer knew the area very well and it was hoped that by the end of the NCIL project an evaluation could be put together to show the success of the project.

- The Chair asked how the Council was closing the loop to ensure that the data collected which identified the HMOs and licenced landlords contributing to the waste issues in the borough was being used to revoke landlord licences. Dennis Lewis advised that the department was working through that process, working with colleagues in the Private Rented Sector team, to develop a fixed matrix on how and when action could be taken, but he added that the process for withdrawing a licence was very prescribed, so the service was focused on encouraging landlords to comply with the rules in the first instance. The framework was complex, as, legally, a dumping offense was done by an individual, which was difficult to link to a landlord, but with the new licensing scheme and NCIL project being implemented there was a way to start looking at that information more accurately. Chris Whyte added that the new licensing scheme allowed the Council to test a method to hold people to account in the right way for the first time. With the NCIL project, there was a requirement as part of NCIL funding to undertake a review of how effective the project had been and whether that represented value for money, as part of other projects being done through NCIL funding. It was expected that the project would run to October 2027, and the Committee asked that the evaluation was brought back to the Committee to see how the project had been delivered and whether it fulfilled its aims, including whether a business case would be put forward to continue the project as business as usual.

- The Committee commented that it was difficult for members to understand impact and improvements made to flytipping and littering in Brent when assertions were made in reports but were not consolidated by figures and indicators, such as how the data compared to previous years. Chris Whyte acknowledged that the report was missing some of those data comparisons, and agreed to provide further information showing year on year comparisons to the Committee. In relation to street cleansing waste volumes, he confirmed that those had significantly reduced over the last year with enforcement actions increasing, showing that impact. It was added that there were some year on year comparisons provided in section 5.2 of the report.

- Whilst recognising the number of fly tip reports had increased, Chris Whyte expressed that this was not necessarily a negative, as it implied that people were engaging more with the reporting system. He confirmed that the Council could evidence, using data, that there had been a significant reduction in the volume of street cleansing waste, which corresponded to an improvement in the number of enforcements undertaken and the revenue generated through taking that action.

- Whilst recognising that a 34% increase in street cleansing reports meant residents were engaging with the reporting system, the Committee highlighted that residents often expressed dissatisfaction to members about the condition of streets and often viewed those 38,000 reports as points of failure. Chris Whyte responded that he viewed the point of failure to be the moment someone dumped items on the ground when they should not, which was the point in which the Council would need to deploy resource to counter that dumping. He believed that the most effective way to do that was in collaboration with residents who lived in those areas and who could provide the relevant information, as well as through education campaigns. He expressed that there was also a proactive element of the contract through the work Veolia did to identify particular dumping hotspots. Due to the fact that the street cleansing volumes had gone down, there was a view that the increase in reports was a measure of people's engagement with the process and willingness to support the work the Council did to keep the borough clean. He also recognised that there were elements of the reporting system that could be improved, including the feedback provided when issues were resolved in order to improve satisfaction with the entire service.

- The Committee asked whether the service regularly analysed reports to see whether the initial response had been correct or whether there had been multiple and repeat reports. Rashmi Agarwal confirmed that the Council did track reporting metrics and discussed this with Veolia in the monthly contract monitoring meeting, with actions taken where required. Gisela Endres (Regional Manager – Brent Municipal and Wembley Stadium, Veolia) advised that there were a number of reasons the system may have duplicate events. The control room checked all reports, and closed those issues that had been resolved, with feedback provided to the resident on the resolution at that point, but where reports had incorrect information due to human error then the control room may need to close those ones and create a new report, and there were system limitations in providing that feedback. Reports were reviewed every week and where reports were closed incorrectly they were investigated and findings presented to the Council.

- The Committee asked what mechanisms were in place to hold the contractor to account and ensure robust monitoring arrangements were in place, particularly in relation to the accuracy of report closures. Councillor Sheth advised that the Council was always looking to make improvements, and felt that the commissioning and contract management team was very experienced and held contractors to account rigorously. Contract managers also attended her Lead Member Briefings to update her on the performance of the contracts and any current or ongoing issues. In response to members' concerns that, historically, KPIs for these contracts had been favourable towards the contractors, making it harder to leverage terms due to poor performance, Chris Whyte highlighted that there was no specific KPIs for system reporting errors, but the system could be tracked to show whether a report had been completed and establish that it was correct. Jamal Maharajh (Performance and Data Insight Manager - Environment Strategy Waste and Climate Action, Brent Council) advised that he personally reviewed all reports closed by Veolia Central Command to check that they were accurate, and there were also internal measures to check the status of when a report had been opened and closed, and photos showing before and after action.

- In relation to the North of the Borough, the Committee fed back that it was difficult for those residents to travel to the tip in Abbey Road, highlighting that Harrow tip was much closer for those residents. They asked whether any conversations had taken place allowing Brent residents to make use of the Harrow tip. Chris Whyte advised that conversations had taken place with the Leader of Harrow Council who had refused to open their skip to non-Harrow residents, which was a long-held position. Residents in the North of Brent had the opportunity to make use of the community skip programme to get rid of their waste.

- The Committee highlighted that the Brent recycling centre was closed for two days a week, which inhibited residents wanting to get rid of bulky items on certain days. Members were advised that the closure was initiated to create a cost saving from the operation, built on a good understanding of user data as to whether that could be done without detriment. The site was not used often due to its location in Brent.

- In response to members detailing cases where residents had received fines where paper may have fallen out of blue bags, officers highlighted that irrespective of how waste got to where it was, the individual still had overall responsibility for the discharge of that waste, and if waste was found on the street the Council would take strong enforcement action. The Council did have a representation process where people could write to the Council to explain the situation, and the Council could not issue fines without evidence or a witness to the offence. Members were advised to get in touch with the department if there were issues with individual cases.

- Rashmi Agarwal confirmed that the total value of the current Fix My Street contract was around £250,000 over a 4-year period, but the terms and estimated value of the incoming contract was not yet confirmed. Social value would be built in to the contract terms for both Fix My Street and the bulky waste contract.

- The Committee highlighted that there were different standards across departments and contractors for dealing with waste reported through Fix My Street. For example, waste was removed swiftly on public highways compared to waste reported in parks. Chris Whyte advised that was likely an issue with the contractor response rather than a system issue, as Veolia was not responsible for parks. He acknowledged that this should be addressed through the new procurement to ensure a standard response across all areas.

- Noting that different departments and contractors were responsible for different areas of land, the Committee highlighted the possibility of co-ordinating cleaning schedules across those areas more effectively. Chris Whyte advised that co-ordination in a more functional way would be a piece of work the Council's monitoring officers would need to do, working with contractors.

In seeking to bring consideration of the item to a close, the Chair thanked officers and members for their contributions to the discussion. As a result of the outcome of the discussion, the following information requests and suggestions for improvement were AGREED:

SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT:

1) Continue to explore other potential sources of funding (external grants, partnerships, regional or national streams) to support fly-tipping prevention, litter reduction, and related enforcement activity.

2) Where feasible, improve coordination between Housing, Public Realm teams and relevant partner organisations to provide a more joined-up cleansing and waste-management service across the borough, addressing inconsistencies caused by administrative boundaries/separate arrangements between estates and nearby streets.

3) Ensure the FixMyStreet and Bulky Waste retendering processes include clear, measurable social-value requirements that directly support the Council's environmental sustainability priorities, underpinned by a robust monitoring framework.

4) As part of the forthcoming retender of the FixMyStreet contract, explore options to improve the user experience. This should include assessing:

i) The feasibility of the system automatically signposting users to the correct responsible department/organisation where a report cannot proceed, rather than the current practice of closing reports that fall outside the contractor's remit (e.g. Housing Association land or Highways);

ii) Whether improvements to GPS and location accuracy functions could be incorporated under new contract arrangements to reduce incorrect land identification and unnecessary report closures; and

iii) The potential for the system to identify and record the stages at which users abandon report submissions, so that the Council can analyse barriers to engagement and improve the reporting journey.

5) Where feasible, improve coordination between Housing, Public Realm teams and relevant partner organisations to provide a more joined up cleansing and waste management service across the borough, addressing inconsistencies caused by administrative boundaries/separate arrangements between estates and nearby streets.

6) Ensure the FixMyStreet and Bulky Waste retendering processes include clear, measurable social value requirements that directly support the Council's environmental sustainability priorities, underpinned by a robust monitoring framework.

7) As part of the forthcoming retender of the FixMyStreet contract, explore options to improve the user experience. This should include assessing:

INFORMATION REQUESTS:

1) Provide an evaluation of all relevant NCIL-funded projects delivered under the Public Realm Improvement Programme 2025–2026 aimed at improving waste management, fly-tipping and littering. The assessment should set out the effectiveness and performance of each intervention, and identify which projects delivered sufficient benefits to justify a business case for continuation, including evidence of income generation and/or cost savings.

2) Where possible, provide details on the proportion of abandoned FixMyStreet submissions over the past 12 months, broken down by reason for abandonment and by device type (mobile, desktop, tablet).

7. Quarter 3 Financial Forecast 2025-26

Councillor Patel (as Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance and Resources) introduced the report, which set out the financial forecast for the General Fund revenue budget, the Housing Revenue Account (HRA), the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) and the Capital Programme as at Quarter 3 2025-26. In outlining the report, she advised that the forecast outturn showed a net overspend of £12.5m against the approved budget, and the Council's revenue budget was revised to approximately £431.4m. She advised that the report detailed the demands and service pressures causing an overspend, particularly highlighting Adult Social Care (ASC) as an area that continued to be a major cost driver as the number of complex cases increased, Housing which was significantly above budget expectations due to the increase in housing demand and reduced supply of affordable housing, the DSG which was projecting an overspend due to increased demand in the High Needs Block, and children's residential care and secure placements which had emerged as additional pressures.

Councillor Nerva (as Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care, Public Health and Leisure) provided an update on the Adult Social Care funding challenges. He advised many of these challenges were not limited to Brent but experienced across the country, with the Association of Directors of Adult Social Care signalling a £300m overspend across England. He advised that Adult Social Care budgets were not static, and often savings plans were written into future years that required actions during the reporting year to achieve. As a demand-led service underpinned by the Care Act, the local authority was under an obligation to provide support, but also wanted to ensure good value for money and the promotion of prevention and early intervention where possible to avoid escalating costs.

Having thanked Councillor Patel and Nerva for introducing the report, the Chair then moved on to invite questions and comments, with the following comments and issues discussed:

- The Committee acknowledged the significant Adult Social Care (ASC) overspend of £8m, but felt that throughout the years very little progress had been made to address recurrent overspends. Rachel Crossley (Corporate Director Service Reform and Strategy, Brent Council) responded that ASC closed the year on budget in 2024-25 and built additional growth into next year (2026-27) to account for additional spend, meaning the years either side of 2025-26 had more positive positions and next year had a more realistic position in terms of growth. She advised that 2025-26 had been difficult in relation to the care analytics work and, through benchmarking across London with the West London Alliance, a £20m pressure was forecast based on inflation and the changes to National Insurance, meaning there were a number of savings that ASC was required to make to hold its placement costs within a smaller growth envelope. Much of the pressure was also driven by the cost of care, and the department was looking at changing some commissioning models to address those challenges. For example, where ASC had not traditionally used block contractors, there were some new providers coming on stream which may lead to opportunities to do block contract work and reduce costs. In addition, the Council was looking to do more in the prevention space and with tech enabled care which would reduce costs for ASC.

- Claudia Brown (Director of Adult Social Care, Brent Council) added that the Council was working on recouping some money, with the majority of money owed from NHS the previous year now recouped and some funding for the current year. There had been work with NHS partners around Section 22 of the Care Act, in terms of the sharing of ASC responsibilities across the Council and NHS, with a joint policy now developed which was clear about the dividing line between who should provide what, particularly considering social care was a chargeable service and the NHS was free. That policy was due to be presented to NHSE and ADASS for approval.

- The Committee asked whether there were any structural or systemic levers the Council could employ to improve the budget position of ASC. Claudia Brown informed members that there was a significant focus on prevention going forward. For example, ASC was working with Public Health to develop prevention at the front door for adults coming in following a fall. The reablement service also tried to capture individuals as early as possible to prevent deterioration, with new equipment providers in place to support that. More therapies had been introduced into the Reablement Service, and this was seeing an increase in the numbers approaching ASC who no longer required care, resulting in cost avoidance. ASC was also starting to review those clients requiring an increase in ASC to see if they could benefit from going through reablement first to prevent that increase in ASC.

- As Lead Cabinet Member, Councillor Nerva assured the Committee that he consistently challenged and queried the overspend to understand what was driving it, particularly the increase from £2.1m in the first quarter to £8.1m mid-year. He advised that the budget had been affected by a series of practice and service issues, and as Lead Member he wanted to be confident that the portfolio was receiving robust financial reporting that enabled ASC to work with the data and make the best use of it, highlighting a need for unity and closer working between finance colleagues and ASC. In discussing the overspend with colleagues, he had learned that the savings not delivered this year were hoped to be delivered in future years. He also reminded members of the challenges with the equipment contract which significantly delayed work on telecare, and which could be attributed to just over £1m of the projected overspend. The local authority had also been impacted by the changes to National Insurance, which the local authority had not automatically received 100% recompense for, meaning the year started worse off due to the need to respond to providers seeking large cost increases to cover their National Insurance increases. Despite the challenges faced, he felt Brent had done well in approving a viable budget for ASC, and the next steps in improving the position would be to ensure robust and accurate reporting mechanisms were in place and encourage senior managers to work in the most collaborative way possible to ensure frequent reporting that was easy to understand by all relevant stakeholders.

- In noting the comments regarding financial reporting both by the Lead Member and during the Budget Scrutiny Task Group discussions, the Committee asked why this had not been identified sooner and what was structurally preventing good reporting from happening. Rachel Crossley advised that ASC undertook an external review of how the local authority was making use of its data, including around budget monitoring, as there were a number of different systems in use for the monitoring of data, and Mosaic was now being reviewed to understand the data and activity happening within that system. Traditionally, detailed budget monitoring had taken place quarterly, but she felt that ASC needed to do this on a monthly basis. Due to turnover of Heads of Finance for ASC this had not been possible, but a new Head of Finance for ASC was due to start which she hoped would bring about that regular reporting regime. In response to when ASC might see the impact of improved monthly monitoring, Councillor Nerva assured the Committee that he had stressed the importance of moving away from the current position, and he was reassured that there was improved budget monitoring and scrutiny with high level meetings for senior managers that involved Lead Members as appropriate. There would also need to be tracking mechanisms in place to review other savings programmes that were planned to enable future forecasting. He hoped to be in a position to have those mechanisms in place by April 2026.

- Noting the significant national risks from recruitment and retention challenges within ASC, the Committee commended the work done in converting agency staff to permanent and ‘grow your own’ initiatives through apprenticeships which they felt was a good long-term approach to addressing staff shortages. They asked how those roles were being funded and whether there was scope to do more of that. Claudia Brown explained that apprenticeships were partly funded by the apprenticeship levy, and 8 Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) social workers were funded by vacant posts. Due to the complexity of cases, there was a limit on how many learners ASC could take, as there was a need for experienced practitioners to manage some of that complexity, so ASC was keeping to a quota of new practitioners to there were still experienced practitioners in post.

- The Committee asked to what extent ASC was considering using AI in homecare and how much of the approved budget was committed to AI efficiencies. Rachel Crossley advised that £250k of the ASC budget had been allocated to digital, including tech enabled care. The savings made the previous year were made through Magic Notes which recorded ASC assessments and made notes and assisted with the production of care plans. There were other opportunities that had been identified for automation including triaging through the front door, wearable tech, and upgrades to the website, as well as improving complaints work through the use of technology and streamlining email systems. She advised that there was more to do in that space over the next year to design a full plan for digital and technology and bring on board a partner in that space.

- In response to the information provided on digital and technology, the Committee highlighted a preference for the Council to build capacity and capabilities in-house wherever possible as opposed to outsourcing, working on the relationships between different services and the Council’s overall capabilities. Rachel Crossley confirmed that digital skills were a priority upskilling area in-house, with the Digital Technology Roadmap recently brought to Cabinet having a big focus on investing in the automation team and getting structures in place for the future. She highlighted that reference to partners was in relation to larger strategic partners, such as Microsoft, where the Council could maximise opportunities.

- The Committee emphasised their recommendation to ensure social value spend was invested in prevention opportunities and community-led work, with the upcoming homecare contract highlighted as a good opportunity to do some of that work. The Committee was pleased to hear that departments were thinking about social value opportunities for upcoming contracts at an early stage, instead of as an ‘add-on’ at the later stages of commissioning.

The Chair moved on to the housing budget, and invited Councillor Donnelly-Jackson, as the Cabinet Member for Housing, to comment on the current strain in the HRA. In outlining the pressures, Councillor Donnelly-Jackson highlighted the self-referral to the Housing Regulator and the subsequent rating of C3 for Brent Council, which identified issues with compliance and governance, and the project in place to address improvements projecting around £1m in spend. Some of the pressures to the HRA were offset by income due in from new housing coming onstream, but she highlighted the importance of balancing the different areas of pressure. Another strong focus for Housing was on reducing void turnaround times to ensure minimum void rent loss which was due to be scrutinised at the next Community and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee. The Chair then invited members to contribute to the discussion on the HRA, with the following points raised:

- The Committee queried whether a HRA Business Plan would be presented. Spencer Randolph advised that the Council had a 30-year Business Plan for the HRA, which was updated every year to provide a forecast for the next 30 years, including projected rent levels, void levels, and predicted income over that 30-year period to provide a budget.

- The Committee asked what the investment plans for the future were within the business plan, and what might need to be re-prioritised to balance the budget. Spencer Randolph confirmed that there were capital investment plans for new builds but there were balances to consider. For example, in the Capital Programme there had been some high-rise refurbishments carried out in Kilburn Square, with the second phase of that focused on refurbishing Windmill Court, but there was a decision to be made on whether to pause that plan and scale it back to allow investment into the current housing stock to carry out capital repairs and improvements needed elsewhere. He emphasised that there was a constant balance needed within the HRA budget, particularly in light of the interest rates paid on borrowing for building, which had increased compared to what had been forecast at the start of the year. He added that the forecast was not too far from the original forecast at the start of the year and so no drastic changes had been made to the budget, with the majority of expenditure going towards repairs and maintenance. The Council was also prioritising compliance and Fire Risk Assessment (FRA) actions which had been possible within the existing budget.

- Noting the comment that most expenditure had gone towards reactive works, the Committee asked whether the budget allowed for any proactive planned works. Spencer Randolph advised that most of the proactive works until recently had been on specific large blocks rather than investment in the entire portfolio, but an analysis of the Council's programme had recently been completed in order to address repairs to existing stock. Councillor Donnelly-Jackson drew members attention to the figures detailed within the report, allocating £18.3m to major repairs and fire safety, £2.9m to energy efficiency works which she highlighted as proactive works to support the longevity of buildings and the Council's commitment to climate action, and £500k towards Lynton Close which she detailed as a long overdue spend to ensure the site supported the growth of residents there.

- The Committee asked what checks and balances were in place to ensure the HRA Business Plan was being delivered. Minesh Patel advised that the HRA 30-year business plan was a financial model setting out assumptions for expenditure and income over a 30-year period, and encompassed major repairs, assumptions around when refurbishments would be needed in new builds or new acquisitions, and other areas of HRA income and expenditure, which was reviewed every year. This ensured that yearly rent setting was factored in, and there was now consistency over rent increases for the next 5 years, adding some stability to those assumptions. He emphasised that only money generated in the HRA could be spent in the HRA and there were no subsidies from the General Fund possible. One of the major challenges for HRAs across the country in recent years had been around fire safety and cladding, meaning any capacity HRAs did have for major works had been used to resource fire safety works. Brent itself had prioritised that safety element in large blocks before putting additional investment into the stock.

- Noting that it was not possible to borrow from the General Fund for the HRA, the Committee asked whether there were any other opportunities to generate more income, such as investment opportunities for stock through grants, and how much more funding would be necessary in order to get to where the Council wanted to be. Minesh Patel advised that some investment was going into the green energy element through the use of specific grants. One area that it was hoped would make a difference was the introduction of rent convergence, which the Council had wanted to ensure was incorporated into the budget under the belief that it would be implemented in 2026-27 as it would have generated an additional £1.9m, but as that had been delayed there had been a need to rework the business plan and reprioritise. That additional income would have made an immediate impact on the budget and also grown each year, but the delay in introducing that further delayed that immediate relief for another year. In terms of how much money he felt was needed to be satisfied, he felt this was difficult to answer. He emphasised that the Council's immediate priority was ensuring all stock was safe, and, as long as that priority was met with the investment available, everything else depended on additional funding. Officers continued to lobby government for different ways to generate income within the HRA but there were limited opportunities. The point was also made that this was a difficulty across the country and in London, with the City of London and Lambeth Council's receiving a capitalisation directive for their HRAs recently. Overall, he expressed a feeling of pride for what Brent had been able to acheive over the last 10 years by bringing new and improved stock into the HRA, regenerating areas with improved quality stock.

- The Committee raised the point that there was a debt within the HRA but they had not been advised what that was. Minesh Patel agreed to confirm the overall debt position in the HRA outside of the meeting. In relation to new build debt, that was self-contained, with a proportion of the rental income from new builds going towards paying off the borrowing undertaken to purchase those builds, and the Council would only pursue buying or building where there was confidence that the rents would generate sufficient income to manage that debt over the borrowing period. He agreed to provide a document setting out what proportion of HRA income went towards debt servicing, repairs, maintenance and other spend in the HRA.

- Noting that the Council had referred itself to the Housing Regulator and that there was work now required to improve the subsequent C3 rating, in addition to the Council's commitments around fire safety, damp and mould, disrepair cases, the Committee asked for reassurance that the HRA was enough to do all the work required in order to maintain the Council's stock. Tom Cattermole responded that the demand for repairs remained high and significantly elevated due to the increase in complex cases and referrals for damp and mould. There was also increased costs on materials and labour putting additional pressures on the HRA, and those pressures accounted for a large proportion of the overspend. Councillor Donnelly-Jackson further emphasised the demand, with 40,000 repairs done in 2024-25. Going forward, the aim was to get into properties earlier before the issues became more complex repairs. To do that, Area Tenancy Managers would be engaging with tenants to collect that information, and she felt that ensuring an effective cycle of repairs was in place was essential.

- In relation to the implementation of interventions aimed at increasing the supply of alternative arrangements for clients currently in the most expensive temporary accommodation placements, outlined in 8.3 of the report, the Committee asked how that could be replicated across all temporary accommodation in the final quarter to avoid further overspend. Tom Cattermole advised that the curve was not yet changing in relation to housing need. It was still an unknown, but the Council was hoping for the Renters Rights Act to pass through parliament to avoid unnecessary evictions by landlords which further impacted housing need and the temporary accommodation demand. The most expensive temporary accommodation was nightly paid Bed and Breakfast, and the Director of Housing Need was designing a plan to end that nightly paid programme to reduce costs. The Council was also focused on making cross-border placements with other local authorities and subregional partners. There were tensions with other local authority colleagues around out of area placements, due to their own capacity pressures, but there was a need to work with others on this and with the GLA particularly around emergency accommodation.

- Moving on to Public Realm, the Committee highlighted a juxtaposition between School Streets and the number of Fixed Penalty Notices (FPNs) issued, highlighting that if School Streets were successful they would expect there to be very few FPNs. Minesh Patel responded that the model did make assumptions that the initial phasing of School Streets would see an increase in income that would drop off over time. He emphasised that the budget should not rely on that income to balance the budget and would need to investigate why those numbers were not decreasing. The Committee made an information request for that to be investigated. Alongside this, they suggested that signage locations and visibility were reviewed to ensure they were not impacting the number of FPNs issued.

In seeking to bring consideration of the item to a close, the Chair thanked officers and members for their contributions. As a result of the outcome of the discussion, the following information requests and suggestions for improvement identified were AGREED:

SUGGESTIONS FOR IMRPOVEMENT:

1) Explore business investment and grant funding opportunities to help mitigate pressures on the Housing Revenue Account (HRA), including costs linked to building safety and decarbonisation programmes such as retrofitting.

2) Maximise the use of social value spend to achieve greater outcomes in prevention and community-led programmes, and to direct investment towards apprenticeship pathways and education and training opportunities delivered through the Social Care Academy.

3) Review and strengthen processes to better support the conversion of apprenticeships into permanent posts, helping to reduce reliance on agency staff.

4) Strengthen financial monitoring processes for Adult Social Care, ensuring robust monthly budget management reporting is in place.

5) Undertake a review of School Street signage throughout the borough to ensure it is sufficiently visible, accessible, and clearly understood by all road users.

INFORMATION REQUESTS:

1) Provide a narrative analysis to accompany the summary of the 30-year HRA Business Plan, explaining how current HRA performance aligns with, corresponds to, and may impact the long-term financial forecasts.

2) Provide a detailed assessment of the impact that actions underway are having on reducing the forecast overspend in Adult Social Care, and outline the plans for managing budgets in-year for 2026/27, including how emerging pressures will be identified early and mitigated. The assessment should include:
    i) Clear delivery timelines and milestones
    ii) Evidence of effectiveness to date, where available
    iii) Identification of any actions that are off track or at risk of delay, with explanations and associated recovery plans

3) Provide data and analysis on Fixed Penalty Notices issued in School Street locations, including year-on-year trends and comparisons where available, together with accompanying narrative commentary explaining what the data shows and whether any identifiable patterns or changes in compliance can reasonably be inferred.

8. Complaints Annual Report 2024-25

The Committee received the Annual Complaints Report 2024-25 from the Corporate Director of Finance and Resources which provided a breakdown of complaints received by departments and the top five issues of complaint for those respective departments, including the number of upheld, partly upheld, not upheld, rejected or withdrawn for each department.

The Chair invited questions and comments from the Committee in relation to the report, with the following comments and issues discussed:

- In relation to complaints about repairs, the Committee highlighted that the number of complaints had not formed part of the KPIs for the contractors delivering repairs. Emphasising the officer time that went into investigating complaints and the extent of upheld complaints in that area, the Committee suggested KPIs relating to complaints should be incorporated into relevant contracts. Spencer Randolph (Director of Housing, Brent Council) responded that this was something he would want to look at implementing with the two new contractors, Wates and Mears, as well as how the Council could be recompensed when complaints were upheld. The new contracts were still being embedded, and this was something he would take forward to contractor meetings by April 2026. As he had not been in post when the contract terms and conditions were agreed, he did not know if these mechanisms were available, but if they were he would want to make use of those. Members made the point that the Committee had recommended incorporating complaints into contractor KPIs at the previous annual complaints review and re-emphasised that recommendation. Officers present agreed that there were contracts in place that would benefit from those additional KPIs if they were not already included.

- The Committee acknowledged the high level of upheld complaints within housing and asked how they were being managed and responded to. Councillor Donnelly-Jackson responded that complaints were an opportunity to learn and improve services. The Council did not want residents to be in a position where they had to complain, and wanted to adopt a culture where all feedback in any forms was accepted, heard, learned from, and actioned, in order to improve services. In 2024-25, housing initiated a full review of complaints handling and promoted learning reviews from that. Training had also been reviewed. The service was also logging compliments in order to collate best practice where services were getting things right. Where a complaint was serious enough, the service would look into compensating the resident for their distress, so it was important there was robust financial oversight of complaints handling to ensure this was not excessive but proportionate to the issue raised.

- The Committee felt that there was a significant proportion of complaints that were escalated to Stage 2 that were upheld, and asked why these had not been filtered and upheld at Stage 1 and whether training would be delivered to assist with that. Tom Cattermole advised that training had initially supported officers in how to deal with improving first time resolutions and embedding the complaints code of conduct. Staff were being trained on understanding and working to new statutory requirements, particularly around timeliness and quality of responses. Often, when a complaint was upheld, it was due to timeliness. Staff training also looked to ensure a culture of empathy, fairness and respect towards tenants and leaseholders in dealing with complaints. Spencer Randolph added that part of staff training also involved helping staff recognise and identify a complaint was being made and ensuring it was logged as such as opposed to an enquiry, in order to ensure they were being learned from. Amira Nassr added that the Complaints Team undertook quality checks on Stage 1 complaints and kept a spreadsheet where the written quality or other aspects of the response was not up to standard and went back to departments in order to ensure the quality of the response improved going forward. For some areas where there was poor quality handling of complaints, the Complaints Team required a Head of Service to sign-off the Stage 1 response.

- The Committee raised concerns that Brent was the joint 11th highest Council for upheld complaints investigated by the LGSCO. Councillor Donnelly-Jackson explained that the LGSCO investigated complaints relating to Housing Need, Adult Social Care (ASC), education, children and young people and healthy streets. Complaints from Social Housing Tenants around Housing Management were investigated through the Housing Ombudsman. She further explained that of those complaints investigated by the LGSCO, 9 had been for Housing Need and 4 for ASC, and the figures in the report represented the combined total which were not purely for Housing Need. She advised members that Housing Need were often dealing with very vulnerable individuals and families who may struggle to understand the parameters of homelessness legislation, and often the Housing Need Team was having difficult conversations with clients as many did not understand why they could not get a home. Some of the upheld complaints related to acceptance of the main duty, quality and suitability of the accommodation offered, including its location, and the discharge of cases. As such, she explained that the number of upheld complaints was due to the significant demand for homelessness assistance and the lack of accommodation supply available.

- Noting the comments about timeliness often being one of the reasons a complaint was upheld, the Committee asked whether the department was well placed to improve that given the turnover of staff in the area. Tom Cattermole advised that additional resource had been assigned in order to deal with the volume of complaints and a team had been recruited that sat between the Housing Need and Complaints departments to address the increased volume.

- Members raised some suggestions for presentation of the data in future reports, including year on year comparisons and more upfront narratives to understand trends.

In seeking to bring consideration of the item to a close, the Chair thanked officers and members for their contributions and invited members to make recommendations and information requests. As an the outcome of the discussion, the following suggestions for improvement and information requests were made:

SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

1) Incorporate complaints performance as a core performance indicator in the procurement and renewal of Council contracts, with appropriate measures included in contract monitoring frameworks where feasible.

INFORMATION REQUESTS

1) Provide further details on the Residents' Complaints Group, including:
    i) when it was established and its purpose;
    ii) its terms of reference;
    iii) current activity and planned future work; and
    iv) an estimated timeframe for reporting back to the Resources and Public Realm Committee on the impact of its work.

9. Scrutiny Progress Report – Recommendations Tracker

The Committee noted the recommendations tracker.

10. Resources and Public Realm Scrutiny Committee Work Programme

The Committee noted the work programme.

11. Any other urgent business

No items of urgent business were identified.

The meeting closed at 9:00 PM

COUNCILLOR RITA CONNEELY
Chair