MINUTES OF THE RESOURCES AND PUBLIC REALM SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
Held in the Conference Hall, Brent Civic Centre on Wednesday 29 July 2026 at 6.00 pm

PRESENT: Councillor A.Patel (Chair) and Councillors I.Ahmed, Anderson, Blackman, Burn, Georgiou, Malonga, Ryan and Want.

Also Present: Councillor Dar was also present as an online participant.

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

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

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Mitchell with Councillor Malonga attending as substitute.

An absence was recorded from Councillor Chowdhury during the meeting.

2. **Declarations of interests**

There were no declarations of interest made during the meeting.

3. **Deputations (if any)**

No deputations were received at the meeting.

4. **Minutes of the previous meeting**

RESOLVED that the minutes of the previous meetings held on 24 February 2026 be approved as a correct record.

5. **Matters arising (if any)**

There were no matters arising 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 2025/26 (Agenda Item 10) to be considered as the first main item 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 Report**

The Committee received a report from the Deputy Director, Democratic and Corporate Governance, which presented the 2026/27 work programme for the Resources & Public Realm Scrutiny Committee.

The Chair began by reminding members that the Committee's Work Programme was a flexible and responsive document. It was noted that the work programme had been developed collaboratively with Committee members and informed by feedback and concerns raised throughout the year. The Chair confirmed that, at this stage, the Committee was content to proceed with the current iteration of the Work Programme, while remaining open to future amendments as necessary.

Having reviewed the work programme report, it was **RESOLVED** to note the Resources & Public Realm Scrutiny Committee work programme for the 2026/27 Municipal Year.

8. **Highways Maintenance Report**

Councillor Knight (Cabinet Member for Cleaner Streets, Transport & Public Realm) was invited to introduce a report providing a comprehensive review of Brent Council's highways maintenance service, including its performance, effectiveness and value for money. It was noted that the report had been provided in response to the Committee's request for a detailed assessment of the Council's approach to maintaining the borough's highway network, including carriageways, footways and associated highway assets. Members heard that the report explained how the Council balances reactive safety repairs with planned and preventative maintenance, the arrangements in place for managing and monitoring the highways maintenance contracts, and the outcomes being achieved through the Council's asset management approach. It was also noted that the report considered the condition of the highway network, investment levels, customer experience, compensation claims, and the challenges associated with managing tree root damage. It was further stated that the report had identified a number of opportunities for further improvement, including strengthening customer communication, enhancing performance reporting and benchmarking, continuing the development of the Council's Highway Asset Management Plan, and making greater use of digital technologies to support future investment decisions.

In continuing, Chris Whyte (Director Public Realm) outlined the principal challenges facing the Council's highways service and advised that a key challenge was maintaining sufficient levels of funding to enable highway works to be delivered to an appropriate standard. The need to effectively manage residents' expectations regarding the condition of the highway network and the Council's ability to respond to maintenance demands was also highlighted. It was further stated that improving communication with residents and increasing customer satisfaction remained important priorities. It was additionally noted that significant inflationary pressures continued to impact the cost of highway maintenance and improvement works, creating further financial challenges for the service. The Committee was informed that managing demand for highway maintenance represented a substantial and ongoing task for officers within the highways function. In terms of future priorities, Chris Whyte advised that continued efforts would be focused on securing investment for planned maintenance programmes, further developing the Highways Asset Management Plan to maximise its effectiveness, and exploring innovative approaches to service delivery. This included the use of AI and digital surveying technologies to improve highways outcomes and inform investment decisions. The importance of enhancing resident communications and performance reporting whilst supporting the Council’s environmental objectives through carbon reduction initiatives and securing the maximum available external funding to support these ambitions was also highlighted.

Having thanked Councillor Knight and Chris Whyte for introducing the report, the Chair then moved on to invite questions and comments from the Committee in relation to the Highways Maintenance report, with the following main comments and issues discussed:

- As an initial query, the Chair sought details regarding the reasons for continued resident dissatisfaction with highway conditions despite the additional investment being made and the volume of repairs undertaken each year. In response, Chris Whyte (Director Public Realm) advised that the primary reason was that, despite the additional investment, funding levels remained insufficient to maintain the full extent of the Council's highway and footway responsibilities to the standard expected by residents. Tony Kennedy (Head of Highways Management) further added that the Council operated both planned and reactive maintenance programmes. It was explained that the additional investment had primarily supported the planned maintenance programme, enabling a greater volume of footway improvements to be undertaken. However, whilst repairs were being completed in some locations, other footways continued to deteriorate, meaning that substantially higher levels of investment would be required to achieve a sustained improvement in condition across the network. In relation to carriageways, it was advised that improvements had been delivered on a number of roads, although many complaints related to unclassified residential roads. It was also explained that greater priority was often given to main routes carrying higher traffic volumes, weights and stresses, resulting in a larger proportion of funding being directed towards maintaining those roads. In relation to reactive repairs, it was noted that reported defects often reflected the underlying condition of sections of highway requiring more significant attention.

- Supplementary queries were raised by the Chair regarding future funding arrangements once the current programme of investment had been expended. In response, Tony Kennedy (Head of Highways Management) acknowledged that securing sufficient funding remained a significant challenge. It was noted that the Council was considering the potential introduction of lane rental charging during the following year, whereby utility companies and contractors undertaking works on strategic routes would be charged for working during peak periods in order to encourage off-peak working and the more efficient completion of works, whilst generating income that could be reinvested into highway maintenance. It was further advised that opportunities to secure additional funding, including SCIL funding, would continue to be explored. In addition, consideration would be given to whether revenue generated through the parking account could be utilised to support medium priority repairs. It was further mentioned that more than 2/3 of reported defects were unable to be repaired at the time, which represented one of the most common causes of complaint from residents.

- Members sought details regarding the contract awarded to Velocity in 2024 for spray injection pothole repairs and the effectiveness of the repair method, Tony Kennedy (Head of Highways Management) advised that injection patching formed one of several maintenance techniques available to the Council. It was explained that the method had been utilised successfully over a number of years, beginning with a pilot programme delivered by Velocity, followed by subsequent contracts delivered by both Velocity and another provider. It was reported that the repairs had generally performed well and that the Council now utilised video surveys and AI technology to identify potholes and clusters of defects across the network, assisting in the development of targeted repair programmes, particularly on unclassified roads.

- When asked as a further question whether spray injection repairs were as durable as alternative methods used by other local authorities, Tony Kennedy (Head of Highways Management) explained that not all pothole repairs utilised injection patching and that the technique was also used to address cracking and other defects before they developed into larger potholes. It was noted that the principal advantage of the method was its ability to treat multiple defects along the full length of a road. It was confirmed that alternative approaches, including JCB Pothole Pro and Rhino patching, had been explored and assessed. Whilst some methods were more suitable for larger carriageway repairs, injection patching had proven effective on lighter traffic and unclassified roads. It was further stated that some injection patching repairs undertaken by the Council had remained effective for up to 6 years.

- In response to a members' queries regarding benchmarking compensation payments for pothole damage claims and the possibility of bringing highway repairs in house, Tony Kennedy (Head of Highways Management) advised that the option of bringing the highway repairs contract in house had previously been explored and that the earlier report on the matter would be provided to the Committee, following the meeting.

- Members sought clarification regarding the potential use of SCIL funding to support a long-term highway investment programme. In response, Councillor Knight (Cabinet Member for Cleaner Streets, Transport & Public Realm) advised that SCIL funding would be utilised for highway improvements where appropriate. However, the scale of the maintenance challenge was emphasised, noting that the current unallocated SCIL balance was approximately £6.2 million, compared with a priority roads backlog estimated at £44.7 million and a pavement maintenance backlog of over £310 million. Whilst SCIL funding could assist in addressing some maintenance requirements, it would not be sufficient to resolve the overall backlog.

- Following on from the previous question, members sought details regarding the level of annual investment required to reduce the maintenance backlog. In responding, Tony Kennedy (Head of Highways Management) advised that the current footway maintenance backlog for areas classified as being in poor condition was estimated at approximately £180 million. However, the cost of undertaking a comprehensive programme of full repairs to those footways was estimated to be closer to £250 million. It was explained that footway condition surveys were undertaken at 20 metre intervals, with sections classified as red, amber or green according to their condition, and noted that individual footways often contained a mixture of these classifications.

- Members then questioned the extent to which newly resurfaced roads were subsequently reopened by utility companies and the frequency with which reinstatement works failed Council inspections. In response, Tony Kennedy (Head of Highways Management) explained that utility companies were notified in advance of planned highway maintenance works and had a 3-month period within which to complete any planned works prior to resurfacing. It was advised that, following resurfacing, utility companies were generally prohibited from undertaking further works on the affected road for a period of 12 months. However, exceptions applied in cases of emergency works and new service connections, where statutory powers entitled utility companies to undertake works regardless of the restriction period. It was further advised that all utility works were subject to a 12-month defect liability period. Council inspectors undertook inspections following the completion of notified works and could require remedial action where workmanship or materials failed to meet the required standards. Any necessary corrective works during the defect period were undertaken at the utility company's expense and not at cost to the Council.

- Details were requested by members on ward-by-ward highway condition data alongside details of investment over the previous 2 years to enable the Committee to assess whether funding allocations reflected both need and equitable distribution. In response, Chris Whyte (Director Public Realm) advised that the information would be provided to the Committee, following the meeting.

- Referring to the committee report, which had detailed that only around 35% of medium priority defects could currently be funded, Tony Kennedy (Head of Highways Management) explained that available reactive maintenance funding was allocated across the full 12-month period to ensure resources remained available throughout the year. Members were advised that high priority defects represented the first call on available funding, with any remaining resources then directed towards medium priority repairs. The number of high priority defects fluctuated according to findings arising from inspections and customer reports, which in turn affected the proportion of medium priority works that could be undertaken.

- Clarification was sought regarding how long it would take to resurface the entire highway network at current funding levels and the proportion of the annual programme funded through one-off allocations rather than the base budget. In response, Tony Kennedy (Head of Highways Management) informed the Committee that the Council's asset management process considered different investment scenarios and assessed the outcomes that varying levels of investment would achieve over time and advised that this information would be provided to the Committee, following the meeting.

- In response to a question concerning the significant increase in customer reports since 2023 and whether this reflected genuine deterioration or improved reporting mechanisms, Chris Whyte (Director Public Realm) advised that the Council had introduced the Fix My Street reporting platform, which had significantly increased the volume of resident reports and customer contact received by the service.

- Members requested further information regarding the weighting applied to factors used when determining road repair priorities, including engineering judgement, councillor nominations, compensation claims and AI analysis. In response, Tony Kennedy (Head of Highways Management) advised that the primary factor remained the independent condition data collected across the network. It was explained that other factors were weighted alongside this information and that councillor nominations generally influenced prioritisation where roads had similar condition scores, enabling one road to be prioritised over another of comparable condition.

- When asked how the Council sought to prevent potholes arising through freeze thaw processes, Chris Whyte (Director Public Realm) once again referred to the injection patching programme, which enabled the early identification and treatment of small cracks and weaknesses within road surfaces before they developed into potholes. By undertaking preventative repairs at an early stage, the Council was able to strengthen vulnerable sections of carriageway and reduce future deterioration.

- Members were keen to seek details regarding how highway maintenance activity supported the Council's climate change objectives. In response, Chris Whyte (Director Public Realm) advised that there were a number of opportunities to reduce environmental impacts through the choice of materials and maintenance approaches adopted. The Council's commitment to recycling materials arising from highway and footway improvement works was highlighted. It was further noted that a greater emphasis on preventative maintenance promoted a more sustainable approach to network management by reducing the need for continual reactive repairs and the associated environmental impacts. Tony Kennedy (Head of Highways Management) further added that the Council's contractor utilised warm mix materials when undertaking repairs, which resulted in a lower carbon footprint than traditional hot mix asphalt. It was also advised that contractual targets required the recycling of materials wherever possible. Materials removed from highways and footways were processed and reused for future schemes, supporting both carbon reduction and the wider environmental objectives of the Council.

- Members questioned whether knowledge of the increased costs that had arisen would have influenced previous decisions relating to the potential insourcing of highway repairs. In response, Chris Whyte (Director Public Realm) advised that the Council was currently part way through a 7-year contract with the option to extend for a further period of up to 3 years followed by a further extension of up to 1 year. Given the need to maintain continuity of service provision, it was considered that the Council would need to begin considering whether to renew the existing contract, extend the current arrangements or pursue an alternative model. It was indicated that a future review of those options would likely be required, although no formal programme had yet been established.

- Concerns were raised regarding locations where the same potholes appeared to require repeated repairs or where multiple potholes arose in close proximity. In response, Tony Kennedy (Head of Highways Management) explained that potholes typically developed where the carriageway was already in decline and subject to ongoing stresses. As a result, whilst one pothole could be repaired, a further defect could subsequently emerge nearby. Members were advised that this issue was particularly prevalent during colder and wetter periods, when multiple defects often appeared within fatigued carriageways. Whilst preventative maintenance and planned carriageway improvements would provide a more sustainable long-term solution, these interventions required substantially greater levels of investment. It was further noted that pothole repairs were undertaken following assessment of individual defects and that, if contractors repaired every adjacent defect encountered, available maintenance budgets would be quickly exhausted.

- The Chair queried whether information existed identifying roads that had experienced a particularly high number of pothole repairs and whether this was used to support resurfacing decisions. In responding, Tony Kennedy (Head of Highways Management) confirmed that the frequency of reactive repairs formed one of the factors considered when prioritising the highway network and contributed towards the overall scoring used to determine resurfacing priorities.

- When asked by members whether information could be provided regarding the condition of footways by ward, Tony Kennedy (Head of Highways Management) confirmed that condition data was available and that a ward level breakdown of footway conditions would be provided to the Committee, following the meeting.

- Details were sought regarding how residents were updated on repairs. In response, Chris Whyte (Director Public Realm) advised that communications represented an area requiring further improvement and identified three key opportunities for improvement. Firstly, there was a need to raise awareness of the investment already made and the improvements delivered in recent years. Secondly, there was value in providing greater public understanding of the natural causes of pothole formation and the factors contributing to highway deterioration. Thirdly, it was considered that residents should be better informed regarding reporting mechanisms and should receive feedback confirming when defects they had reported had subsequently been repaired. It was emphasised that improved communication across all three areas would help manage expectations and improve public awareness of the Council's highways work.

- Members questioned whether resurfacing techniques could be improved to reduce cracking along carriageways and whether effective engagement was taking place with TfL regarding the condition of bus lanes. In response, Tony Kennedy (Head of Highways Management) advised that bus lanes remained the responsibility of the Council. It was noted that TFL had historically provided principal road maintenance funding of approximately £1 million per annum, although this funding had been frozen in 2017/18 and had largely been replaced by limited emergency funding only. It was further explained that a variety of recognised resurfacing methods existed within the industry and that it was essential that any joints created during resurfacing works were properly sealed, as such locations inevitably represented potential points of weakness within the carriageway.

- In response to a question regarding Brent's rating within the Department for Transport's Local Highway Authority Highways Maintenance Ratings 2025, Tony Kennedy (Head of Highways Management) advised that local authorities had received limited notice regarding the assessment method before ratings were published. It was explained that the Department for Transport had assessed the Council's performance based on a particular year during which preventative maintenance activity, specifically thin surface sealing, had not been undertaken because condition data and AI analysis had not identified it as a priority. It was noted that preventative maintenance had been undertaken in years before and after the period assessed and that discussions with the Department for Transport regarding the method remained ongoing, alongside a number of other local authorities. Chris Whyte (Director Public Realm) further added that the Council's understanding of the Department for Transport's expectations and assessment method had since improved. It was advised that the Council did not consider that its overall performance justified the rating received and expected future assessments to reflect a more accurate position as understanding of the requirements continued to develop.

- In considering longstanding concerns regarding the condition of infrastructure around Staples Corner Flyover and the associated roundabout, members requested an update on discussions with TfL. In addressing the concerns raised, Tony Kennedy (Head of Highways Management) advised that responsibility for the area was shared between Brent, Barnet and Transport for London. It was explained that TfL maintained its own prioritisation programme for resurfacing works and undertook to obtain an update regarding the current position of Staples Corner within that programme.

    - Returning to the earlier discussion regarding communications, Councillor Knight (Cabinet Member for Cleaner Streets, Transport & Public Realm) suggested that greater use could be made of educational information, including material explaining the lifecycle of a pothole and the impact of weather conditions and water on highway deterioration. The significant achievements delivered by the service despite limited funding from TfL and wider financial constraints was also highlighted.

- Further queries were raised regarding whether the current contractual arrangements incentivised the speed and volume of repairs or the quality and durability of repairs. In response, Chris Whyte (Director Public Realm) advised that both factors formed important components of the current model. It was explained that the Council now operated a dual contractor arrangement across the borough, with one contractor undertaking reactive repairs and planned works being shared across separate north and south borough contracts. It was noted that this represented a different approach to arrangements that had existed prior to 2003 and reflected lessons learned from earlier contractual difficulties. It was considered that the current model was delivering improvements in highway condition, maintaining quality standards and benefiting from strong working relationships with both contractors.

- Highlighting concerns relating to bus lanes needing to remain safe and fit for purpose given the high levels of usage experienced on key routes across the borough, raised further questions around preventative maintenance measures for bus lanes, particularly on heavily used routes where significant stress was placed on the carriageway. Officers were requested to provide further information on this matter to the Committee, following the meeting.

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

Recommendations to Cabinet Member:

- To review the extent to which Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) funding is being used to support highways maintenance and improvement works and identify any further opportunities to maximise its contribution towards addressing the maintenance backlog.

- To engage with Transport for London (TfL) to explore funding opportunities and partnership arrangements to support the maintenance and improvement of bus lanes, helping to reduce pressures on the Council's highways maintenance budget.

Suggestions for Improvement:

- Develop a quarterly highways (inclusive of footways and carriageways) dashboard, with information presented at ward level where practicable. This should provide an accessible overview of network condition, including annual condition survey data, investment levels, planned and reactive maintenance activity, and key performance indicators.

- Develop and implement a communications and engagement programme to improve public understanding of pothole management and highways maintenance. This should include, but not be limited to:
    - Explaining the root causes of potholes, the factors that accelerate their deterioration, and why pothole formation remains a significant highways maintenance challenge.
    - Improving public understanding of the wider challenges associated with maintaining the highways network, including funding constraints and the factors that influence maintenance priorities.
    - Providing information on the investment being made in pothole repairs and highways maintenance, and the outcomes being achieved.
    - Promoting the channels available for residents to report potholes and other highway defects.
    - Providing greater transparency on how reported defects are assessed, prioritised and repaired.
    - Exploring opportunities to keep residents informed of progress and outcomes where they have reported a pothole or other highway defect.

Information Requests

- Provide a one-off baseline analysis of ward-by-ward highways condition and associated investment over the past two years.

- Provide a detailed briefing note on the borough's methodology for prioritising highways maintenance and investment, including the factors taken into account when determining priorities and allocating resources, supported by illustrative case studies demonstrating how the methodology is applied in practice.

- Provide an assessment of the extent to which current levels of highways investment are sufficient to maintain and improve the condition of the borough's highways, including an estimate of the time required to address the existing maintenance backlog.

- Provide a breakdown of the current highways maintenance programme, distinguishing between reactive and planned preventative maintenance, and setting out the contribution made by each funding source, including the Council's base budget, grants, CIL, Section 106 contributions, Mayoral funding, and any other external funding streams. The information should identify which elements of the programme are supported by recurring funding and which are dependent on one-off or time-limited funding sources.

- Provide an update on external partner contributions to highways maintenance and improvement programmes across the borough over the last three years, including the respective responsibilities of the Council and partner organisations, the funding and resource contributions made by each party, any outstanding commitments, and progress in delivering agreed responsibilities and contributions. The update should include a specific case study on the Staples Corner maintenance programme, setting out the respective responsibilities of the Council and external partners, funding and resource contributions, any outstanding commitments, and progress against agreed delivery timescales.

- Provide benchmarking information from comparable London boroughs on pothole management, including:
    - Average repair times.
    - Repeat repair rates.
    - Resident satisfaction levels.
    - Compensation claim volumes, compensation costs, and claim success rates.
    - Service delivery models (in-house, outsourced or hybrid).
    - Annual expenditure on pothole management services.
    - The proportion of highways maintenance expenditure allocated to reactive pothole repairs compared with planned preventative maintenance.
    - Pothole repair methodologies and intervention thresholds.

- Provide information on the assessment undertaken of insourcing in relation to the following contracts:

- O'Hara Bros. Surfacing Ltd - Highways Maintenance Contract
- GW Highways Ltd - Highway Infrastructure Contract
- Velocity UK Ltd - Injection Patching Contract

The information should include any options appraisals, business cases and/or benchmarking undertaken, together with an assessment of the potential implications of insourcing for service performance, resilience, workforce capacity, risk and value for money compared with the current outsourced arrangements.

- Provide a detailed briefing on the Council's broader approach to improving customer satisfaction in relation to highways maintenance, with a particular focus on pothole management.

- Provide information on the preventative maintenance measures currently undertaken for bus lanes to ensure they remain safe and in good condition.

- Provide details of the preventative maintenance and inspection programme for newly planted trees, including how the Council monitors and manages the risk of trees causing damage to adjacent footways and carriageways, and what measures are in place to enable early intervention before significant repairs are required.

- Provide information on carriageway and footway reinstatement works carried out by utility companies following excavations, including:
  - How often utility companies are required to return and correct works that fail Council inspections or do not meet the required standard.
  - The powers and processes available to the Council to ensure utility companies rectify substandard work and cover any associated costs.
  - Measures being taken to improve the quality of reinstatement works and minimise disruption to residents.
  - How the Council ensures that the cost of correcting poor-quality reinstatement work is met by the responsible utility company rather than the Council.

Please note, whilst the Cabinet recommendations, suggestions for improvement and information requests agreed as an outcome of each item were based on discussions and issues identified during the meeting, the final requests have been refined following the meeting to improve clarity and readability, while remaining consistent with the Committee's discussions and intended outcomes.

9. **Budget Update & Medium Term Financial Strategy**

Councillor Grahl (Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance & Resources) was invited to introduce a report providing an update on Brent’s overall financial position by examining the financial outturn position for 2025/26, the Quarter 1 financial forecast for 2026/27 and the medium-term financial outlook.

In presenting the report, members noted that the update included three reports providing a comprehensive view of Brent's financial position by explaining where the Council had come from through the 2025/26 Outturn, where it currently stood through the Quarter 1 2026/27, and where it was heading through the MTFS to enable the assessment of financial performance, the challenge of assumptions, the monitoring of savings delivery, the understanding of emerging risks and the evaluation of the sustainability of the Council's medium-term financial strategy.

Having thanked Councillor Grahl for introducing the report, the Chair then moved on to invite questions and comments from the Committee in relation to the Budget Update report, with the following main comments and issues discussed:

- As an initial point, the Chair requested an update on the delivery of thematic savings across each Directorate, based on the commitment previously made to the Scrutiny Committee in February 2026. In response, Minesh Patel (Corporate Director Finance and Resources) began by advising that Finance and Resources had an overall savings target of just under £1.5m, comprising savings within commissioning, procurement, digital transformation, efficiencies and workforce initiatives. It was reported that the principal challenge related to digital savings, not due to an inability to deliver them, but because of capacity constraints impacting the pace of implementation. It was noted that alternative efficiencies and overachievement in other areas were being utilised to mitigate potential shortfalls. Whilst remaining confident that digital savings would ultimately be delivered, it was further noted that timing represented the key risk. The potential in-year shortfall was currently estimated at approximately £90,000 against the overall target, which was considered manageable within the Directorate.

  Secondly, Rachel Crossley (Corporate Director Service Reform and Strategy) reported that Service Reform and Strategy had a savings target of approximately £2.316m. It was advised that savings proposals had initially fallen short by £705. Of the overall target, £500,000 had already been delivered and a further £1.2m remained on track for delivery. Approximately £440,000 of savings were currently rated amber, reflecting uncertainties associated with procurement exercises and digital transformation projects which still required market testing. It was further mentioned that one saving of £100,000 was currently rated red and related to fees and charging for individuals who funded their own care but chose to have their care arrangements managed by the Council. Work remained ongoing with the legal team regarding consultation requirements for the introduction of administration fees in this area. Whilst delivery remained possible, there was uncertainty regarding achievement of the full year saving.

  Thirdly, Nigel Chapman (Corporate Director Children, Young People and Community Development) advised that the Directorate's savings requirement for the year was £1.58m. It was reported that £1.16m of savings had been identified and were considered achievable. These included workforce efficiencies, particularly through reductions in agency expenditure, alongside grant related savings and reductions in tail spend. It was advised that the most challenging areas related to the digital and resident experience programmes. Whilst savings would ultimately need to be achieved within the Directorate, specific and tangible savings proposals had not yet been identified in relation to those programmes and further work with colleagues remained necessary.

  Fourthly, Gerry Ansell (Director Inclusive Regeneration and Climate Action) advised that Neighbourhood Regeneration had thematic savings totalling

£2.5m, comprising efficiencies and income maximisation measures. It was explained that these included fee increases, capitalisation opportunities and maximising external funding sources. Whilst some risks existed within the programme, arrangements were in place to offset any areas of underperformance, and it was reported that the Directorate remained on track to deliver its savings target within the financial year.

Fifthly, Chris Whyte (Director Public Realm) advised that the principal focus within Public Realm related to generating improved returns from parking services. This included exploring the commercialisation of underutilised car parking spaces, increasing the use of AI and CCTV technologies to improve enforcement compliance, and reducing reliance on pay and display machines across the borough in order to eliminate ongoing maintenance and repair costs. It was reported that these programmes remained on track. However, one area of slippage related to proposals for a lane rental scheme. It was noted that implementation had been delayed because legislation required to devolve responsibility from the Department for Transport to TfL remained subject to legal processes. As a result, implementation was now anticipated from March or April 2027 rather than during the current financial year.

Finally, Thomas Cattermole (Corporate Director Residents and Housing Services) advised that the Directorate had identified savings totalling £2.6m, all of which were currently rated green and on track for delivery. However, a £560,000 saving associated with commissioning and procurement was noted with caution, as it relied on securing additional supply through 10 year plus 1 day leases in order to reduce the use of nightly paid temporary accommodation. It was highlighted that delivery remained dependent on conditions within the temporary accommodation market.

- The Committee then sought clarification regarding the Council's reserve position and financial resilience. In response, Rav Jassar (Deputy Director Corporate and Financial Planning) advised that reserves had reduced significantly in recent years as a consequence of rising service demand, inflationary pressures and ongoing funding challenges. Whilst annual budget growth had been included to address these pressures, expenditure within temporary accommodation, adult social care and children's social care had exceeded budgetary assumptions, resulting in overspends funded from reserves. It was advised that, following the improved funding settlement and budget setting process agreed in February 2026, the Council had commenced rebuilding reserves over the medium term in order to strengthen financial resilience and address future risks. Current available reserves were estimated at approximately £20m. It was noted that the Quarter 1 forecast projected an overspend of £9.5m and, if sustained throughout the year, this would require funding from available reserves. It was acknowledged that reserve levels remained low and represented an ongoing concern.

- The Chair subsequently queried whether the existence of the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) deficit effectively meant that reserves had already been exhausted. In response, Minesh Patel (Corporate Director Finance and Resources) clarified the distinction between the Council's General Fund reserve and other usable reserves. It was advised that the General Fund reserve of £20m was held separately and would not ordinarily be utilised to fund overspends, instead providing protection against unforeseen emergencies and significant financial shocks. It was explained that the reserves used to support budget management and overspends were distinct from the General Fund reserve. Turning to the DSG position, members were reminded that the Government had previously introduced accounting arrangements which prevented cumulative High Needs deficits from impacting directly on local authority balance sheets. Those arrangements remained in place until April 2028. It was explained that national reforms had subsequently been developed to address the issue, with the Government committing to fund 90% of accumulated deficits, leaving local authorities to fund the remaining 10%. It was reported that provision for the Council's share had already been incorporated within the 2026/27 budget planning process. Councillor Grahl (Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance & Resources) further added that there was no statutory requirement specifying a minimum level of reserves, although many local authorities sought to maintain reserves equivalent to approximately 5% of General Fund expenditure. For Brent, this equated to approximately £20m. Referring to the DSG position, Councillor Grahl welcomed the Government's commitment to address 90% of local authority deficits and confirmed that Brent had submitted an application accordingly. It was observed that Brent had acted responsibly over a number of years to reduce its deficit; however, concern was expressed that the proposed national approach could benefit authorities that had taken less action. It was also noted that no long-term mechanism had yet been identified to prevent similar deficits from accumulating again in the future.

- In response to members’ queries regarding the key decisions and strategies that had enabled Brent to remain in a comparatively strong financial position whilst many other local authorities had experienced significant financial difficulties, Minesh Patel (Corporate Director Finance and Resources) advised that a fundamental factor had been the Council's willingness to take difficult decisions over a sustained period. It was acknowledged that many of the decisions taken during the previous 10 years had not been easy and had often involved reductions in service provision alongside efficiency measures. A comparison was made between Brent's approach and that of some local authorities that had sought to avoid difficult decisions or had pursued higher risk income generation strategies, including significant commercial acquisitions. The importance of striking an appropriate balance between meeting statutory responsibilities and directing resources to priority areas whilst ensuring long-term financial stability was stressed.

- Clarification was sought by members regarding the Council's approach to homelessness prevention and the support available to individuals at risk of homelessness. In response, Thomas Cattermole (Corporate Director Residents and Housing Services) advised that the Council's immediate priority was reducing reliance on the most expensive forms of temporary accommodation, particularly nightly paid accommodation used during the initial 56-day statutory duty period. The Directorate was seeking to increase the supply of more cost-effective temporary accommodation whilst strengthening homelessness prevention and reduction activity. It was explained that the Council had commissioned a digital tool known as Xantura to assist in identifying individuals and households at risk of homelessness by drawing together information from multiple systems. It was advised that the homelessness prevention programme, led by Laurence Coaker (Director Housing Needs and Support), was focused on preventing homelessness before it occurred. It was noted that homelessness, the fear of homelessness and concerns regarding eviction represented some of the most common reasons for residents approaching Council hubs. Early intervention therefore remained critical in reducing future homelessness and associated costs. The Committee heard that staff operating from both the Turning Point Single Homelessness Service and New Horizons Families Homelessness Service worked with individuals and families at the earliest opportunity in order to prevent homelessness wherever possible. It was further explained that some residents approached the Council because they feared becoming homeless, despite not yet having received formal eviction notices, and that early engagement with landlords often enabled tenancies to be sustained. It was emphasised that preventing homelessness remained significantly preferable to responding once homelessness had occurred. It was further advised that work was also underway to review and develop the Council's Supported Housing Strategy.

- Following up, when asked how many officers were specifically employed in homelessness prevention roles, Thomas Cattermole (Corporate Director Residents and Housing Services) advised that whilst not having the exact figures available at the meeting dedicated teams operated within Single Homelessness, Families Homelessness and Tenancy Sustainment services with detailed figures to be provided following the meeting.

- Further queries were raised regarding whether homelessness prevention was sufficiently understood across the Council as a corporate issue, rather than solely a housing issue. In responding, Minesh Patel (Corporate Director Finance and Resources) advised that temporary accommodation and homelessness were recognised as whole Council issues. It was emphasised that homelessness had implications not only for housing services but also for education, children's social care, adult social care and wider public service partners. It was explained that the Council's transformation programmes aimed to ensure that any officer encountering an individual or household at risk of homelessness was able to identify and address issues at an early stage rather than waiting for the matter to escalate into a housing crisis. Thomas Cattermole (Corporate Director Residents and Housing Services) added that every Council service had a role to play in preventing homelessness and noted the significant impacts associated with homelessness for public health services, mental health services and the NHS. It was advised that new collaborative approaches with partners were already being developed within the Harlesden area.

- The Chair referred to examples of neighbouring authorities purchasing newly developed residential accommodation at discounted rates and questioned whether Brent was pursuing similar opportunities. In response, Minesh Patel (Corporate Director Finance and Resources) advised that discussions of this nature were undertaken regularly with other local authorities. However, it was noted with caution that some arrangements which initially appeared attractive did not always provide good value when considered over the longer term due to financing costs. It was emphasised that the Council sought to balance short-term opportunities with medium and long-term value for money considerations whilst continuing to explore such opportunities on a regular basis.

- Members recommended that consideration be given to developing a borough-wide register of vacant commercial premises together with clear targets to reduce long term vacancies through enterprise, community and creative uses. In addition, it was suggested that flexible or reduced rental arrangements be explored where this could help bring vacant units back into use. The Chair further highlighted the importance of ensuring robust asset disposal arrangements were in place and that Council assets were being marketed to the widest possible audience, including entrepreneurs and community organisations. In response, Minesh Patel (Corporate Director Finance and Resources) advised that both matters would be referred to the Director of Property and Assets and that a response would be provided following the meeting.

- Clarification was sought regarding downside stress testing within the Medium-Term Financial Strategy that had been undertaken for potential scenarios involving higher fuel costs, inflation, interest rates and provider costs. In response, Minesh Patel (Corporate Director Finance and Resources) advised that the Medium-Term Financial Strategy was inherently subject to changing circumstances and was therefore based upon a range of modelling assumptions. It was explained that the Council generally adopted a balanced position between best case and worst-case scenarios and that many existing contractual arrangements already contained mechanisms to manage inflationary risks. It was emphasised that assumptions were reviewed regularly and that the Medium-Term Financial Strategy was refreshed annually.

- Referring to the pattern of overspends often emerging within Adult Social Care later in the financial year, the Chair queried whether this reflected a recurring cycle within the service or was merely coincidental. In response, Rachel Crossley (Corporate Director Service Reform and Strategy) advised that a combination of factors contributed to this position with it explained that the Council had incorporated significantly more growth funding within the current budget. Whereas the previous year had included approximately £12m of growth alongside savings of just under £5m, the current year included approximately £20m of growth and savings of £2.3m. Members were advised that the main risk continued to relate to placement costs. It was also highlighted that increases in national insurance had taken place after budget assumptions had been set during the previous year and had therefore created additional pressures that had not been reflected in growth allocations.

- The Chair referred to a longstanding Scrutiny Committee request for a breakdown of revenue and expenditure associated with commissioned services and questioned whether this could be provided. In responding, Rachel Crossley (Corporate Director Service Reform and Strategy) acknowledged that procurement and contract management information had historically been an area of weakness for the Council and had been the subject of a procurement improvement programme. It was advised that improvements had since been made to contract registers and management information and any data available would be shared with the Committee, following the meeting.

- As a final query, members were keen to seek details regarding the preventative support models available to homeless individuals and those at risk of homelessness. In response, Rachel Crossley (Corporate Director Service Reform and Strategy) advised that work had been undertaken to develop services beyond traditional mental health provision, which often operated within a more eligibility driven framework under the Care Act. It was reported that a number of preventative approaches had been piloted within the Harlesden area, including greater involvement of voluntary sector organisations and community-based services. It was explained that these models had partly been developed in recognition of trust barriers that sometimes existed between residents and the Council. Confirmation was provided that further information could be shared with the Committee. Thomas Cattermole (Corporate Director Residents and Housing Services) further added that homelessness support teams were also operating within hospital settings and mental health wards to assist individuals with mental health needs in preparing for a successful return to the community and to reduce the risk of homelessness occurring following discharge.

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

Information Requests

- Provide a detailed update on delivery of the 2026/27 Budget savings programme. The response should include a tabulated breakdown of progress against both cross-council thematic savings and service-specific savings proposals, containing the following information:

  Cross-council thematic savings

  CC01 Commissioning & Procurement **|** *CC02 Digital Programme* **|** *CC03 Efficiency* **|** *CC04 Workforce* **|** *CC05 Income Maximisation* **|** *CC06 Resident Experience & Channel Shift*

  - For each thematic category listed above and each specific proposal within it:
    - The original saving target in £, the amount delivered so far, and an overall RAG rating for each proposal

  - A further breakdown for each contributing directorate to each proposal:
    - The saving committed in £, the amount delivered to date in £, and a RAG rating

  Service-specific savings

  NR01 Lane Rental Scheme **|** *NR02 Asset Utilisation* **|** *PHRS01 Reduce Subsidy Loss* **|** *PHRS02 Homelessness Prevention* **|** *PHRS03 Housing Benefits Claim Reduction*

  - For each service-specific proposal:

- o The original saving target in £, the amount delivered to date in £, and a RAG rating

- Top-line summary of any slippage and mitigating actions

- Provide the delivery plans for each cross-council thematic savings category, where available *(CC01 Commissioning & Procurement* **|** *CC02 Digital Programme* **|** *CC03 Efficiency* **|** *CC04 Workforce* **|** *CC05 Income Maximisation* **|** *CC06 Resident Experience & Channel Shift).* The information should include key milestones and timelines, quantified risks and mitigations, analysis of variances and their underlying causes, and any actions being taken to support delivery of the savings programme.

Please note, whilst the information requests agreed as an outcome of each item were based on discussions and issues identified during the meeting, the final requests have been refined following the meeting to improve clarity and readability, while remaining consistent with the Committee's discussions and intended outcomes.

10. **Revitalising High streets**

Councillor Kelcher (Cabinet Member for Regeneration & Planning) was invited to introduce a report providing an assessment of the performance, effectiveness, and impact of the Council’s current approach to revitalising high streets and town centres. In presenting, it was noted that the Council intended to develop a comprehensive High Streets Strategy and welcomed the opportunity for the Committee to undertake pre-scrutiny of the emerging strategy prior to its development, with a view to ensuring that it reflected the priorities and areas of focus identified by members.

Having thanked Councillor Kelcher for introducing the report, the Chair then moved on to invite questions and comments from the Committee in relation to Revitalising High Streets report, with the following main comments and issues discussed:

- As an initial query, members questioned how the emerging High Streets Strategy would address anti-social behaviour within town centres and how success would be measured. In response, Councillor Kelcher (Cabinet Member for Regeneration & Planning) advised that the strategy would seek to establish a strong vision for Brent's high streets by promoting their unique identities and encouraging more people to visit them. It was stressed that efforts to celebrate Brent's diverse offer and improve the attractiveness of town centres would have limited value if visitors continued to encounter anti-social behaviour. As a result, the strategy would incorporate measures relating to anti-social behaviour alongside wider considerations including environmental quality, parking and town centre promotion. Gerry Ansell (Director Inclusive Regeneration and Climate Action) added that anti-social behaviour was addressed through a range of Council services, including investment in CCTV and enforcement activity. It was noted that a key ambition of the strategy was to support the creation of attractive and welcoming destinations within Brent that encouraged people to spend time within town centres.

- Members sought reassurance that areas such as Stonebridge, which experienced poorer access to established town centres, would benefit from the proposed strategy. In response, David Glover (Head of Planning and Development Services) advised that significant regeneration activity was already planned across locations including Stonebridge, St Raphael's and Harlesden. It was explained that the High Streets Strategy would provide a borough-wide framework identifying strengths, challenges and opportunities before progressing to more detailed work focused on the specific needs of individual communities. It was emphasised that the Council wished to work collaboratively with residents, businesses and local communities to shape future interventions as opposed to imposing solutions upon them. Councillor Kelcher (Cabinet Member for Regeneration & Planning) added that priorities would need to be established in order to maximise the impact of available resources. The importance of improving connections between communities and high streets to increase footfall and support economic activity was highlighted. Reference was also made to the proposed £13m cycle route linking Harlesden and Wembley through Stonebridge, which was expected to support the objectives of the High Streets Strategy.

- When asked how the strategy would measure success in terms of local employment, business growth and apprenticeships, Councillor Kelcher (Cabinet Member for Regeneration & Planning) advised that the strategy was still in development and that such measures could be incorporated. Examples including the Brent Hairdressing Academy in Harlesden, which provided training and employability support, and Brent Start, which offered assistance with employment and apprenticeships, were highlighted. It was indicated that supporting skills development and local employment opportunities should continue to form part of the Council's approach.

- Members highlighted the value of community-led initiatives such as the Willesden Co-design workshop and questioned whether similar engagement would inform the strategy. In response, David Glover (Head of Planning and Development Services) confirmed that extensive engagement with residents, businesses and community groups would be essential. It was noted that the strategy would establish a framework which would subsequently be refined through more localised consultation and engagement.

- In response to a question regarding the cleanliness and attractiveness of town centres, David Glover (Head of Planning and Development Services) advised that work led by Rubina Charalambous (Economic Growth Senior Manager) had secured funding in a number of locations to address environmental quality issues. It was acknowledged that the condition of public spaces played a significant role in shaping perceptions of town centres and highlighted the importance of selecting appropriate materials and design approaches.

- Concerns were highlighted regarding the lack of a substantive revenue budget for much of the proposed work, with members' querying what contingency arrangements existed should external funding sources reduce. Clarification was also sought regarding how success was currently being measured. In response, Councillor Kelcher (Cabinet Member for Regeneration & Planning) acknowledged the importance of external funding but advised that a range of activities could continue to be progressed within existing resources, including campaigns and promotional work. It was noted that additional funding would increase the scale and impact of interventions but emphasised that opportunities would continue to be pursued, including initiatives capable of being self-funded through bidding.

At this stage in proceedings, the Committee agreed to apply the guillotine procedure under Standing Order 62(c) in order to extend the meeting by 30 minutes to allow continued consideration of the item and the remaining business on the agenda.

In continuing, Rubina Charalambous (Economic Growth Senior Manager) outlined a range of successful external funding bids secured by the Council. These included £3.1m from the GLA for the Neasden Community Partnership Programme, funding of £70,000 for the Ealing Road Creative Enterprise Zone, together with a number of NCIL funded projects and £110,000 secured through the GLA Summer Streets Programme. It was also advised that consideration was being given to alternative funding mechanisms, including the potential establishment of a Business Improvement District. In relation to monitoring and measuring performance, Rubina Charalambous advised that the Council worked closely with the GLA and had access to a range of data including footfall, dwell time and visitor spending metrics. These indicators were being utilised to assess town centre performance. The importance of strengthening local business organisations, including the Wembley Traders Association, Neasden Business Collective, Little India Trading Association and One Kilburn was also emphasised.

- When asked how closely the Council worked with One Kilburn, Paul Lewin (Spatial Planning Manager) advised that Richard Hay (Town Centre Manager) was actively involved in the partnership and that One Kilburn also received support from officers involved in community engagement and town centre management activities. Councillor Kelcher (Cabinet Member for Regeneration & Planning) additionally noted that opportunities could be explored for the Leader of the Council and the Cabinet Member for Communities, Culture and Cost of Living Support to attend One Kilburn meetings in order to strengthen engagement and support the development of local partnerships.

- Members queried references within the committee report to aspirational and non-aspirational businesses and questioned what action could be taken to encourage a transition away from non-aspirational uses, such as gambling centres and fast-food places towards more aspirational ones within town centres. In response, Councillor Kelcher (Cabinet Member for Regeneration & Planning) advised that the Council had commenced the process of preparing a new Local Plan and that town centres would form a specific area of focus within that work. It was stated that his intention was to utilise all planning powers available to the Council, including new powers announced by Government, in order to address issues associated with the proliferation of certain business uses where appropriate. David Glover (Head of Planning and Development Services) further added that Brent had been among the early authorities to introduce planning policies restricting the location of new fast food places near schools and limiting over-concentration within town centres. It was advised that similar concerns existed in relation to gambling establishments and that these issues were being considered through both planning and licensing mechanisms. David Glover further noted that a cross-Council group led by Public Health was examining ways of addressing gambling related harms and that these matters would form part of future Local Plan considerations.

- As a final point, the Chair emphasised the importance of ensuring that the emerging High Streets Strategy considered all aspects of the town centre experience, including business operation, property occupation, the visitor and resident experience, public realm improvements and lessons that could be learned from successful high streets elsewhere, in order to maximise the effectiveness of future interventions.

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

<u>Recommendations to Cabinet Member:</u>

- Develop and implement a coordinated, cross-council approach to the High Streets Strategy, ensuring effective alignment across relevant services and strong partnership working with key external stakeholders, including the Metropolitan Police, TfL, Trading Standards, local businesses and neighbouring boroughs, where appropriate.

- Use the High Streets Strategy as a vehicle for achieving Brent's wider economic, social and community objectives through innovative and joined-up approaches that maximise the contribution of high streets and town centres to education, skills, employment, business growth, community wellbeing and addressing homelessness.

- Embed the High Streets Strategy within Brent's wider planning, regeneration and economic development framework, including the Brent Local Plan, and establish a clear long-term vision for the vitality, viability, resilience and transformation of high streets and town centres, informing planning, regeneration and investment decisions.

- Ensure the High Streets Strategy is informed by robust evidence and meaningful, inclusive engagement with residents, businesses, community organisations and other stakeholders, including seldom-heard groups, so that its priorities and proposed interventions reflect local needs, aspirations and lived experience.

- Strengthen the role of local businesses and representative organisations in shaping and delivering the High Streets Strategy, creating effective mechanisms for collaboration, advocacy and collective action to support sustainable economic growth across Brent’s high streets and town centres.

- Set out a coordinated approach within the High Streets Strategy to tackling persistent vacancies and under-utilised premises, aligning planning, economic development, business support and enforcement functions, and identifying how the Council's powers, resources and partnerships can support their productive reuse. This should promote a diverse and sustainable mix of businesses, community organisations and social enterprises, including through the flexible repurposing of vacant premises for affordable workspace, community and cultural uses, youth provision, training and employment initiatives, and other uses that support local regeneration priorities where appropriate.

- Adopt a place-based approach through the High Streets Strategy, using robust local data and intelligence, including occupancy and vacancy rates, business mix, and opportunities for business attraction and growth, to identify the distinct needs and opportunities of Brent's high streets and town centres and inform priorities, investment and interventions.

- Ensure the High Streets Strategy is supported by clear governance arrangements, accountability mechanisms and a robust delivery plan, with measurable, centre-specific objectives and performance indicators to track progress and outcomes. This should include indicators relating to vacancy rates, footfall, business growth and survival, investment, employment, community safety, cleanliness, public realm quality and resident and business satisfaction.

- Develop a sustainable long-term funding and resourcing approach for the High Streets Strategy that maximises the use of existing Council resources and funding streams, including CIL, leverages external funding and partnerships, and reduces reliance on short-term funding to support the long-term transformation of Brent's high streets and town centres.

- Consider the role of parking in supporting the vitality, accessibility, connectivity and attractiveness of Brent's high streets and town centres, including an assessment of the merits and impacts of piloting free short-stay parking and other favourable parking approaches on footfall, business growth and visitor access, while balancing environmental and sustainability objectives.

- Present the draft High Streets Strategy to the Resources and Public Realm Scrutiny Committee prior to Cabinet approval, accompanied by a clear explanation of how evidence, stakeholder engagement and consultation findings have shaped its vision, priorities and delivery approach.

Information Requests;

- Provide data on vacant premises across the borough, broken down by high street, town centre and ward, including vacancy duration, property type, the status of vacant premises and any known barriers to bringing them back into use, where available.

Please note, whilst the Cabinet recommendations and information requests agreed as an outcome of each item were based on discussions and issues identified during the meeting, the final requests have been refined following the meeting to improve clarity and readability, while remaining consistent with the Committee's discussions and intended outcomes.

11. **Scrutiny Progress Update - Recommendations Tracker**

The Committee agreed to note the progress of any previous recommendations, suggestions for improvement, and information requests of the Committee. The Chair further noted that the recommendations tracker would be continuously monitored and reviewed, ensuring any new recommendations were considered then.

12. **Any other urgent business**

No items of urgent business were identified.

The meeting closed at 9.15 pm

COUNCILLOR ANUP PATEL
Chair