



MINUTES OF THE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Tuesday 9 September 2014 at 7.00 pm

PRESENT: Councillor A Choudry (Chair), Councillor Colwill (Vice-Chair) and Councillors Daly, R Patel (attending for Councillor Van Kalwala) W Mitchell Murray, Oladapo Southwood and Thomas (attending for Councillor Allie), together with Mr Alloysius Frederick, and appointed observer, Lesley Gouldbourne.

Also Present: Councillors Perrin and Aden, Butt, Hector, Hirani, Kabir, McLennan and Filson

Apologies were received from: Councillors Allie and Van Kalwala, Co-opted Member Dr J Levison and appointed observers Jenny Cooper and Chrissy Jolinon

EXTRACT

1. Parking Services Update

Michael Read (Operational Director, Environment and Protection) introduced a report to the committee updating members on the delivery of parking services. He explained that in September 2012, the Executive had agreed to make a raft of changes to the service to modernise delivery, reduce expenditure and provide a platform for future efficiencies. Key to these changes was the development of a new online parking permit database designed to facilitate access to the service via telephone, text and the council's website, whilst removing counter services. These changes posed no difficulties for adequately capturing the data required for residents' permits but it was recognised that substantial changes would be required for visitor parking which had operated using scratch-card permits. It had subsequently been agreed that a virtual visitor permit system be implemented and this had been built into the contract specification put to the market. The contract had been awarded to Serco with anticipated savings for the council of up to £850k per annum, predicated on the reduction of Civil Enforcement Officers permitted by the introduction of virtual permit system.

Michael Read acknowledged that there had been significant problems with the initial implementation of the new system and described the work that had been undertaken to address these issues. The committee heard that initial capacity issues for the call centre had led to long call waiting times and a high rate of call abandonment. Members' attention was drawn to the table at paragraph 5.3 of the report, detailing improvements in call centre performance. Michael Read highlighted that the call abandonment rate had reduced from 26.3 per cent between July and September 2013 to 1.7 per cent between April and June 2014. The average call waiting time had also reduced from 4 minutes 27 seconds to 39 seconds over the same period.

During the subsequent discussion the Committee emphasised that many elderly and vulnerable residents had reported that they had experienced significant difficulties attempting to use the new system. Many of these residents were not computer literate, nor au fait with mobile phone technology and given the difficulties and cost implications associated with registering visitor permits via the call centre, faced significant barriers to accessing the system. Members also noted that the system relied upon residents having the car registration details of a visitor in advance of the visit or being able to quickly arrange the permit on arrival. The committee expressed strong concerns that vulnerable residents who relied upon regular visits from friends, relatives and carers, could become isolated as a consequence of being unable to use the new permit system. Members noted that there had been numerous requests for alternatives to virtual permits to be considered and queried what action had been taken in response. The committee also queried how long a resident had to register a visitor's car, before a parking ticket could be issued to the vehicle. Further questions were raised regarding the cost to residents of calling the permit service and whether customer feedback from elderly residents had improved since the initial difficulties. The committee queried the savings made by replacing scratch-cards with the virtual permit system. Members also commented upon errors made in relation to Controlled Parking Zones (CPZ) for resident permits and the importance of keeping the council's website up to date, noting that the date for final usage of the scratch-card visitor permit was no longer correct.

The committee then questioned whether it was legal for CCTV cameras, installed for community safety reasons, to be used to issue parking tickets. Councillor Thomas advised that the use of these cameras had caused particular difficulties in the High Street in Harlesden, where ill planned road works had left businesses without appropriate loading bays, thereby forcing deliveries to be made in areas where parking was prohibited. Councillor Thomas invited Michael Read and Sue Harper to view the difficulties caused at the High Street in Harlesden in person. A query was then raised regarding the length of time that was considered reasonable to stop in areas where parking was restricted before a ticket was issued by cameras. Concerns were expressed regarding inappropriate use of CCTV vehicles by officers and it was highlighted that reports of these being dangerously parked had been received. Members questioned what monitoring arrangements were in place to ensure that CCTV vehicles were used correctly.

At the invitation of the Chair, Councillor Hector addressed the committee to advise that residents with English as second language had also experienced difficulties accessing the parking permit system.

Responding to the queries raised, Michael Read advised that alternative measures to support residents in accessing the parking permit service had been explored. As a consequence of this work, a Cared-For permit would be soon be introduced. This would be a physical permit that could be displayed in a carer's car, then returned to the resident at the end of the visit. The use of a physical permit in these circumstances would not affect the overall operation of the system as it would only apply to a very small proportion of users. The option to have up to two 'trusted phone numbers' had been introduced for those who had been unable to use the phone or text service. This enabled a resident to nominate two people who would be able to authorise visitor permits on their behalf. He further explained that an Equalities

Impact Assessment (EIA) had been completed in 2012 when developing the new strategy for delivering parking services in Brent. The EIA had identified that residents who had difficulty accessing or using a computer would be adversely affected by the proposed changes. In response to the EIA, options to access the service via telephone or text message had been added. The council was currently working with the contractor to extend automatic answering to enable a twenty-four hour telephone option to be available from late Autumn 2014. The EIA was currently being revised and if continued access issues were identified, officers would explore how the current system could be adapted to address these. Michael Read emphasised that feedback from customers had indicated that many people had found that their needs had been met by the trusted-numbers option, or that they had simply needed some initial assistance understanding how to use the new system.

Michael Read further advised that calls to the service were charged at a local rate for landlines and at the standard charge for mobile phones. Civil Enforcement Officers were required to wait for approximately 5 minutes before issuing a ticket to an offending vehicle to allow time for visitor registration. The savings made by the council by moving to virtual visitor permits was approximately £500k a year, though it was difficult to separate these savings from those achieved overall. Michael Read acknowledged the issues regarding CPZ and advised that these had been addressed in the report before the committee. He accepted that it was important to ensure that the council's website was kept up to date but advised that he would be proposing to Cabinet that there be no deadline for use of the remaining scratch-cards visitor permits held by residents.

Addressing the committee's queries regarding the use of CCTV cameras, Michael Read advised that the council's use of these to issue Penalty Charge Notices (PCNs) was lawful and explained that permission had been sought from the Department of Transport. There had been errors made by the Council in relation to the difficulties caused by the contractor undertaking work in the High Street in Harlesden. However, the council had cancelled a number of the PCNs issued where there was evidence of loading and unloading taking place. It was clarified that CCTV vehicles were permitted to park in areas where parking was prohibited if there was no other alternative to capture footage of the offences; however, at no time should a CCTV vehicle be parked in such a way as to cause danger to pedestrians or other road users. The council investigated any allegations of misuse of the vehicles and took disciplinary action where appropriate. The council had worked with Serco to ensure that staff understood their legal responsibilities and did not cause reputational damage to the council. Michael Read explained that this issue would become defunct as legislation was forthcoming to prevent local authorities from using CCTV to issue PCNs, except in very limited circumstances.

The committee welcomed the work being undertaken to revise the current EIA and sought details of the timeline for completion and the contribution members would be invited to make. It was suggested that consideration be given to lengthening the period allowed before a PCN could be issued, in light of some of the difficulties reported by residents. Members highlighted the importance of training for Civil Enforcement Officers and reiterated concerns regarding the use of CCTV cameras to issue PCNs, particularly where they had been installed for community safety

purposes. A view was put that the council should not wait for legislation to be enacted before ceasing to use CCTV to issue PCNs.

Michael Read advised that the EIA would be completed over the next few months. He invited members to report any examples of customer experiences of the Parking Permit Service and agreed to look into whether the period allowed before a PCN was issued could be extended.

The Chair highlighted that the committee had unanimously expressed concerns that the current functioning of the visitor parking arrangement was far from adequate. He emphasised the feeling of the committee that there was overwhelming evidence of public dissatisfaction with the existing system, drawn from the level of complaints made directly to councillors, and proposed that Cabinet be advised to reappraise the visitors parking arrangements, taking into account the serious concerns expressed by members and residents. The committee agreed with the Chair's proposal.

The Chair thanked Michael Read and Councillor Perrin for attending the meeting.

RESOLVED:

That Cabinet be requested to reappraise the existing arrangements for visitor parking permits, taking into account the serious concerns expressed by the Scrutiny Committee and members of the public.