



## **MINUTES OF THE EQUALITIES COMMITTEE**

### **Monday 20 February 2017 at 6.00 pm**

PRESENT: Councillors McLennan (Chair), Harrison, Mashari and Thomas

Also Present: Councillors Farah and Mahmood

Apologies were received from: Councillor Davidson

#### **1. Declarations of interests**

There were no declarations of Interests made by Members.

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

**RESOLVED** that the minutes of the previous meeting, held on 6 December, 2016 be approved as an accurate record of the meeting.

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

The Committee heard that Section 4.3 of the Task and Finish Group's Progress Report on Eastern European Communities living in Brent had been updated to include **schools** as a venue for holding local drop-in information sessions. This had been done in accordance with Resolution (iii) of Minute No 8 of the minutes of the meeting held on 6 December 2016.

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

None.

#### **5. Impact and mitigation of the Overall Benefit Cap**

David Oates (the Council's Head of Customer Service and Benefits) delivered a presentation on the impact and mitigation of the Overall Benefit Cap (OBC). He informed Members that the reduced OBC had been introduced in November 2016 and it had limited further the funds available to benefit claimants living in the Borough (£442.31 per week for working age couples and single parents and £296.35 per week for single persons living in the London area). He stated that 1,500 people in Brent had been affected by the OBC, with 600 of them subject to the previous cap and single claimants aged 35 or over living in privately rented accommodation being the most heavily impacted client group. Moreover, 80% of capped claimants were unemployed, 40% of which received Job Seekers Allowance (JSA), 35% received Income Support and 25% received Employment Support Allowance (ESA). In terms of demographic impact, there was a large amount of people whose ethnicity was unknown, but data available broadly reflected the Revenues and Benefits caseload and Brent's areas of deprivation. Mr

Oates informed the Committee of the four options available to claimants to address the impact of the OBC, stating that most likely, residents had to find somewhere more affordable to live (including outside Brent) or find work sufficient to qualify for Working Tax Credit. He noted that the Council's approaches had changed to implementing more partnership work and strategic engagement rather than using an interventionist approach. Measures which had been implemented to mitigate the impact of the OBC included targeted publicity (emails, texts, publications in the Brent Magazine); the addition of a central Hub of information to be used by partners, a benefit calculator, and a budget calculator on the website; the targeting of the Local Welfare Assistance Scheme and Discretionary Housing Payment Fund to assist or incentivise affected residents; and the improvement of the interaction between services in the Customer Services Centre 'triage' in Brent Civic Centre.

Members of the Committee asked questions which related to partnership working arrangements, including compatibility of Information Technology (IT) systems, sharing of information and working agreements with third parties such as housing associations and the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP). In response, Mr Oates explained that the Council had been sharing data and engaging with the relevant specialist agencies rather than trying to develop expertise in various matters. In terms of IT, good data sharing between parties had existed despite the fact that systems had not been fully compatible. Furthermore, collaboration with the DWP had been promoted by their representation at meetings of the Welfare Team.

In response to a request for aggregated information on gender, disability and ethnicity (by community) of those impacted by the OBC, Mr Oates explained that gender breakdown of affected claimants would be provided at the next meeting of the Committee. He clarified that the categories used by the service should be reflective of the corporate template. He also reminded Members that despite the fact that twenty-two ethnic groups existed, over one third of claimants did not disclose their diversity information and therefore it would be challenging to provide a fully accurate picture on ethnicity. As far as disability was concerned, Mr Oates noted that people who had qualified for an exemption through receiving a disability benefit had not been affected by the Cap.

A Member of the Committee enquired about measures being taken to ensure that the most vulnerable residents did not 'slip through the net' and asked what Brent did differently from other Local Authorities in order to mitigate the effect of the OBC. Mr Oates responded that information had been limited as claimants received less income, but it had not been possible to find out how they spent it. In terms of mitigation, he highlighted that people who were likely to be affected had been contacted prior to the Cap being introduced via a targeted campaign. Moreover, Council staff working with vulnerable residents had been trained and a considerable amount of work had been done to ensure that those who were most vulnerable did not 'slip through the net' and were effectively signposted to the services they were entitled to. In addition, when English was not the first language of the claimant, members of staff at the Customer Service Centre speaking the same language or a relative or a friend of the claimant could help them complete the application. However, Mr Oates emphasised that while support options had been available, often people had not responded to communication until they had been affected by the Cap.

Councillor Mahmood, who was present at the meeting, enquired what actions were being taken to engage ethnic minorities who had been affected by the Cap and who

might need to move out of the Borough. Mr Oates explained that the Cap had had a disproportionate effect on Brent residents and, as a result of this, some of them had to move out of the Borough. He assured the Committee that Brent had tried to make the process as smooth as possible – for instance, residents who had been relocated had received a pack containing information on support services, healthcare and schools in their new area. Moreover, an officer had been based in the Midlands to assist former Brent residents on their arrival.

Members of the Committee commented that residents had to be encouraged to take ownership of the situation and engage with the services provided as the impact of the OBC could be worse without cooperation on their part.

The Committee requested information on the impact of a potential further reduction of the OBC, including whether residents who had already been displaced would have to relocate again. Members also enquired about the number of housing association residents that had been affected by the OBC and asked for an assurance to be provided that none of the Looked After Children (LAC) or foster carers who looked after LAC had not been adversely affected by the Cap.

**RESOLVED that:**

- (i) The contents of the Impact and Mitigation of the Overall Benefit Cap report be noted;
- (ii) Information on the number of housing association residents affected by the OBC be provided to a future meeting of the Committee;
- (iii) Aggregated information on gender, disability and ethnicity of those impacted by the OBC be provided to a future meeting of the Committee; and
- (iv) Information on the impact of a potential further reduction of the OBC, including whether residents who had already been displaced would have to relocate again, be provided to a future meeting of the Committee.

*Councillor Mashari entered the meeting during discussion of the above item at 6:07 pm.*

**6. European Union Referendum and the Impact of Uncertainty on Brent Residents**

Anne Kittappa (the Council's Senior Policy Officer, Strategy and Partnerships) introduced the report, which looked at the impact of uncertainty on Brent residents and services following the European Union referendum. She noted that the 2011 Census, indicated that 11.5% of Brent's population were born in Europe. This share had spiked in 2014 and then decreased over time by 2015, with the number of babies born to European mothers declining as well. Mrs Kittappa highlighted that European nationals had been overrepresented in the Electoral Register as they constituted 16% of the electorate in January 2017, with the majority of the population being concentrated in Wembley Central and Alperton wards. She noted that Brent had been aware of a small proportion of cases of fraud when Brazilian,

Russian and Ukrainian nationals had been buying counterfeit Portuguese and Hungarian passports respectively. In terms of employment, European nationals constituted a small proportion (up to 13%) of staff at the London North West Healthcare National Health Service Trust, Central and North West London National Health Service Foundation Trust and London Ambulance Service. Mrs Kittappa noted that the proportion of applications to nursing courses made by European Nationals had declined over five years from 3.1% to 2.5%.

Members enquired about the next steps following the report and Carolyn Downs (the Council's Chief Executive) asked if numbers of European nationals employed by the Council were available. David Veale (the Council's Director of Human Resources and Organisational Development) said that ethnicity data was collected but not nationalities data so the team would look at that information might be collected.

As the report focused on European nationals living in Brent, it was suggested that it should be renamed to 'European Union Referendum and the Impact of Uncertainty on European Union Nationals Living in Brent'.

The Committee heard that the number of rough sleepers had increased with Romanian citizens constituting the largest proportion of rough sleepers. Members highlighted that homelessness and casual illicit labour (as per paragraph 11.4 of the report; page 27 to the Agenda) were linked and enquired how the Council worked with Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC) and the Police to tackle employers who hired casual labourers. This led to a discussion about potential services targeted at Eastern Europeans which could provide stability for these communities, and the work and recommendations arising from the Task & Finish Group on Eastern European communities, the scope of which was to identify and address socio-economic barriers and challenges facing these communities. Members were reminded that a report was presented to them on 6 December 2016 but that a progress update would be provided later in the year.

Ms Downs highlighted that key issues Brent had to address included overcrowding in Houses of Multiple Occupation and street drinking. She said that the Council had not been connecting well with Eastern European communities and pointed out that these communities were probably under-represented in the workforce. Pascoe Sawyers (the Council's Head of Strategy and Partnerships) informed the Committee that a Community Engagement strategy was being developed and one of its key themes would be engaging with European communities. He also proposed a session for Members, building on this report, on the implications and impact of Brexit in the Borough once more information had been gathered.

It was noted that addressing the issue of hate crime (paragraph 8.1 of the report on page 25 to the Agenda) had been a priority for Councillor Miller, Cabinet Member for Stronger Communities.

**RESOLVED that**

- (i) The contents of the European Union Referendum and the Impact of Uncertainty on Brent Residents report, be noted;

- (ii) The report be renamed to 'European Union Referendum and the Impact of Uncertainty on European Union Nationals Living in Brent'; and
- (iii) A report examining whether Brent, as a borough, would be worse off in the aftermath of the European Union Referendum be provided to a future meeting of the Committee;

*Councillor Mahmood left the meeting at 6:59 pm.*

## **7. Brent's Equality Analysis process**

Andreyana Ivanova (the Council's Head of Equality) introduced Brent's Equality Analysis process report, explaining that it focused on the Equality Analysis (EA), also known as Equality Impact Assessment, process adopted by the Council to assess equality impact of Council's decisions on service users and communities. The Council also has an internal EA process for assessing impact on employees with protected characteristics from restructures but this is not within the scope of this report. She reminded Members that in early 2015 the Council introduced an online EA system, which was supported by a comprehensive communications and face-to-face programme.

The system incorporates an initial screening and a second stage full equality impact assessment. The online system provides users with guidance of every stage of the process and they can access useful statistics and examples of best practice. Apart from a mandatory e-learning module, the Equalities team provide face-to-face training and ongoing support to service areas. Equality considerations are part of the Council's business processes and Equalities implications have to be considered in all decision-making. Directors have to sign the final version of the analysis; and the EA has to be published as part of the relevant decisions and reports. However, Ms Ivanova pointed out that the system had not been used efficiently as some report writers preferred to complete the paper version of the EA. The Equalities team sought feedback from EA users who acknowledged that the system had not been very intuitive and user-friendly. In addition, the reporting and monitoring function of the system is very limited and in order to extract relevant Equalities Analysis information (e.g. negative, positive, neutral impacts identified) the team has to interrogate the EAs manually.

Ms Ivanova highlighted that the annual contract for the software had been due for renewal and a decision had to be made whether the system was fit for its purpose. The Chair commented that if the Council had been paying £1,000 per year for a system that had not been efficient, other options had to be explored. David Veale (the Council's Director of Human Resources and Organisational Development) explained that the team had been considering the introduction of an internal electronic form on the Intranet if necessary.

In responses to questions that related to the functionality of the system, accessibility of EAs by Members, data available, and any potential training, Ms Ivanova explained that Appendix 1 (page 37 to the Agenda) showed what the system interface looked like, with the only difference being that Members couldn't see the relevant supporting information and guidance which provided useful context

to EA writers. In addition, the Equalities team would overview the draft EA and make comments and suggestions. Sometimes one EA would be reviewed by the team two or three times until a comprehensive version had been developed. EAs are included in all relevant reports that are presented to committee meetings. Mr Veale encouraged Lead Members to approach the Equalities team if they had specific questions on Equalities.

**RESOLVED that**

- (i) The contents of Brent's Equality Analysis process report be noted; and
- (ii) An update on the decision regarding the contract renewal of the Equality Analysis online system, and the potential implementation of any changes, be provided to a future meeting of the Committee.

**8. Progress update on the 2016-17 Equality & Diversity Action Plan**

Andreyana Ivanova (the Council's Head of Equality) provided an update on the progress of the Equality Strategy Action Plan. She drew Members' attention to page 41 to the Agenda pack. She highlighted that in January 2017 the Council had been ranked among the top 200 Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender-inclusive employers by the 2017 Stonewall Workplace Equality Index, which constituted almost a hundred points improvement since the previous year. She also emphasised that all status updates had turned 'green' as all objectives had been completed.

Ms Ivanova informed the Committee that the Equalities team had started working on the 2017/2018 Equality Strategy Action Plan, which linked to the current plan and would be informed by key activities and initiatives in individual service plans. The committee requested that the Women's Budget Group and Runnymede Trust publications be considered during the preparation of the 2017/2018 Equality Strategy Action Plan.

**RESOLVED that**

- (i) The annual progress update of the 2016/17 Equality Strategy Action plan, be noted.
- (ii) The Women's Budget Group and Runnymede Trust publications be considered during the preparation of the 2017/2018 Equality Strategy Action Plan; and
- (iii) The draft 2017/2018 Equality Strategy Action Plan be provided at the next meeting of the Committee.

**9. Exclusion of Press and Public**

**RESOLVED** that under Section 100A (4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the press and public be excluded from the meeting during consideration of Agenda Item Number 10 on the grounds that it involved the likely disclosure of exempt

information as defined in Paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A, as amended, of the Act:

Paragraph 3

“Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information).”

10. **Equal Pay Audit benchmarking (verbal update)**

Following a request from Members at the last meeting held on 6 December 2016, David Veale (the Council’s Director of Human Resources and Organisational Development) provided a verbal update comparing Brent’s Gender Gap Audit data to other London Boroughs. He noted that reporting Gender Gap Audit data would become a legal requirement for local authorities from April 2017, with a requirement to publish reports no later than March 2018. Data from the Local Government Association Earnings Survey 2014/15 indicated that Brent had been comparable with other West London boroughs and its position had been reasonably good when compared with other boroughs in London. A Member of the Committee commented that Brent had to continue benchmarking against other authorities to ensure that it was performing well and identify potential improvements.

**RESOLVED that** the verbal update be noted.

11. **Any other urgent business**

There was no other urgent business.

12. **Date of next meeting**

The date of the next meeting of the Equalities Committee was scheduled to take place on 2 May 2017 at 6 pm.

The meeting closed at 7.56 pm

COUNCILLOR MARGARET MCLENNAN  
Chair