



Brent

**MINUTES OF THE RESOURCES AND PUBLIC REALM SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**  
**Tuesday 9 January 2018 at 7.00 pm**

PRESENT: Councillor Kelcher (Chair) and Councillors Colacicco, Crane, Ezeajughi, Mashari, S Choudhary and Kabir

Also Present: Councillors McLennan, Miller and Southwood

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

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Aden, Davidson and Stopp. Councillors Choudhary and Kabir were substituting for Councillors Aden and Stopp respectively.

**2. Declarations of interests**

For purposes of transparency, Councillor Crane declared that he was a Director of I4B.

**3. Deputations (if any)**

There were no deputations.

**4. Minutes of the previous meeting**

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the previous meeting held on 27 November 2017 be approved as a correct record.

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

There were no matters arising.

**6. Budget Scrutiny Task Group Report**

The Chair introduced the report of the Task Group, highlighting that it had been finalised prior to the provisional Local Government Finance Settlement announced on 19 December 2017. The Settlement provided an option to certain councils to increase council tax by a further one per cent, over and above the existing maximum increase of 3.99 per cent per year. Councillor McLennan (Deputy Leader), Althea Loderick (Strategic Director, Resources) and Ravinder Jassar (Head of Finance) were present to address members' queries.

Councillor McLennan reminded the committee that the Council had set a two year budget in 2017/18 and acknowledged that this was reflected in the approach taken by the Budget Scrutiny Task Group. A decision had not yet been made regarding the option to add a further one per cent to the planned level of Council Tax increase for 2018/19. At the invitation of the Deputy Leader, Ravinder Jassar provided a brief commentary on the 12 recommendations of the Budget Scrutiny Task Group, confirming that there was broad agreement to all of the recommendations and that a number were already in place. With reference to Recommendation 1, Ravinder Jassar explained that the council's medium term financial planning encompassed planning, as far as reasonably possible, for the consequences of Britain's exit from the European Union (EU) by holding an adequate level of reserves and building contingencies into the base budget for known and measurable impacts such as inflation. Recommendation 2 had also been met, as London Councils had agreed to a sub-regional veto with regard to the Strategic Investment pot produced via the London business rates pool. In response to a query, it was clarified that the decisions regarding these funds would require a two thirds majority vote to be carried. The Government had not yet confirmed whether any restrictions would be placed on funds drawn from the London business rates pool.

Members subsequently questioned the implications of bringing procurement back in-house for the 2017/18 and 2018/19 budgets, with particular comment sought on the challenging savings in place for the department. Further detail was sought regarding the risks that Britain's exit from the EU posed for Brent's local economy and the mitigating actions identified. Concern was expressed regarding the council's level of preparation for these risks and it was queried how Brent's planning compared with that of other councils, whether the council undertook scenario planning and if the local economy was prepared for related shocks. It was noted that the Economic Prosperity Board had undertaken an impact assessment on the implications of Britain's exit from the EU on the workforce. A query was raised regarding whether the implications of the role out of Universal Credit had been factored into the budget.

Several queries were raised regarding the option to further increase council tax. Members questioned what process would be undertaken if the option was to be pursued, whether the Localism Act provided any powers to place a one-off levy on those in the highest council tax banding and how the impact on Brent's resident's would be considered.

Responding to the queries raised Althea Loderick advised that the savings targets for the Procurement team remained unchanged and as with any savings target across all departments, any shortfall had to be reallocated. The proposal to bring the Procurement team back in-house was based on identified support requirements and the desire for the council to be able to steer any additional investment needed. It was confirmed that the final Budget report that would be presented to Full Council in February 2018 would include details on the Council's savings targets, including procurement savings.

Addressing the committee's questions regarding Britain's exit from the EU, Ravinder Jassar advised that the impact of this on the local or national economy or on Local Government funding was not yet known. All it was possible to do at this time was to plan in response to known factors, such as the Local Government Finance Settlement, and to ensure sufficient contingencies were in place to address

any disruption in funding. A key, measurable risk of Britain leaving the EU could be the impact on interest rates and inflation. When the decision to leave the EU was announced the value of the pound fell which has led to an increase in inflation and in recognition of this, the council, as part of the its budget planning process, set aside monies to ensure that there are sufficient funds to meet this additional cost.. Ravinder Jassar advised that he understood that other boroughs were taking similar approaches to planning for risks associated with Britain leaving the EU. The council took part in a London wide exercise to stress test financial plans to ensure it was robust. Councillor McLennan emphasised that it would be possible to undertake more informed planning once the negotiations for the post-leave settlement/agreement had begun. Althea Loderick added that scenario planning was undertaken as part of the work in building the corporate risk register and emergency planning, which were reviewed via the Audit Committee. It was agreed that the risk register would be shared with the committee for members' consideration.

Ravinder Jassar confirmed that the impact of the roll out of Universal Credit had been factored in to the Customer Services budget.

Speaking to members' questions regarding council tax, Councillor McLennan reiterated that no decision had yet been taken and advised that consultation was due to begin via the Brent Connects forums. Work was also underway with the Partnership and Engagement team to explore other mechanisms for consultation. It was anticipated that most London Councils would take up the option of the additional increase. Ravinder Jassar added that the Government's financial modelling plans had assumed that all councils would take the option to increase council tax by the further one per cent. Peter Gadsdon advised this would equate to approximately £1.1million. Althea Loderick confirmed that the council did not have any powers to implement a one-off levy.

The committee welcomed the report of the Budget Scrutiny Panel and RESOLVED:

- i) That the report of the Budget Scrutiny Panel and the 12 recommendations detailed therein, attached as appendix A to the report from the Director of Performance, Policy and Partnerships, be endorsed and referred to Cabinet for consideration;
- ii) That the Strategic Director of Resources and Deputy Leader provide an update to the committee on the implementation of the recommendations of the Budget Scrutiny Panel, six month's following Cabinet's consideration of the Budget Scrutiny Panel's report.
- iii) That the Strategic Director of Resources and Deputy Leader ensure that an impact assessment is undertaken with regard to the option to increase council tax by a further one per cent and to quantify the financial impact on Brent Residents.

## **7. The Digital Strategy and the Customer Experience**

Peter Gadsdon (Director Performance, Policy and Partnerships) introduced the report on the Brent Digital Strategy 2017-2020. The report provided an overview of the Digital Strategy, approved by Cabinet in June 2017 and outlined the proposed

Channel Strategy currently in development. The Digital Strategy set out a vision for a programme of change, driven by use of new technologies, through which the priorities of the Brent 2020 plan could be met. In line with this, the Channel Strategy would help to provide clarity regarding the impact on the customer experience across all channels of contact with the council and ensure consistency in the quality of access.

Highlighting the key themes of the Digital Strategy, Peter Gadsdon advised that the work being undertaken focussed on enabling customers to access services online, via their preferred device at any time, whilst promoting self-help and digital inclusion. At the same time, a significant focus of the strategy was to address the needs of vulnerable service users who were not able to self-help or access services independently. For this cohort, the future experience for accessing services would be more tailored to their needs, including appointments, relational support in community based settings and earlier interventions by core services. The Digital Strategy also included an objective to '*Trial radical approaches and develop innovative solutions for new models of service delivery*'. Workstreams under this objective would trial and implement new technologies, including chatbots (virtual agents) and next generation telephony, across multiple council departments and service areas.

Peter Gadsdon outlined some of the work currently underway, advising that the council had invested in a new development team, which would be tasked with building a single system to replace and streamline a number of back-office systems. Another big investment in progress was the procurement of the new telephony system which would provide a much more flexible and responsive communications system for Brent.

In the subsequent discussion members sought an update on the progress made in reducing the number of publically advertised telephone numbers for council services, questioned whether the council had undertaken research regarding preferences for different automated telephone menu options and queried whether the website could be accessed in different languages. Questions were raised regarding response times with regard to emails and how to manage public expectations. Members expressed support for the Harlesden Community Hub model but noted that issues had been raised regarding uniformity and quality of service due to the range of different partners contributing to its delivery. It was subsequently queried whether this issue was being monitored and addressed. With regard to the Channel Strategy and the different contact channels identified, the committee emphasised that face-to-face was a broad category and questioned whether a consistent offer would be provided by all staff, including back-office staff who may be approached in the civic centre. Questions were raised regarding the council's Client Index system and how this fit into the Digital Strategy, with comment particularly sought on the potential for achieving cost savings for the council by tailoring services and implementing social interventions. Questions were raised regarding contingencies should the council's IT infrastructure fail and members queried what the council could do to expand the provision of high-speed broadband in the borough.

Sadie East (Head of Transformation) confirmed that the number of publically advertised telephone numbers had now been reduced to just under 100 from 230. Peter Gadsdon explained that this work was ongoing and the ambition was to reduce this to as small a number as possible. Work was also underway to replace

generic department or team emails with electronic forms which would capture the information and direct the enquiry to the correct officer or service. It was considered appropriate for response times to written enquiries to be the same, irrespective of whether they were made by letter or email, as both required the same level of effort to investigate and prepare a response. An evaluation was required to assess customers' preferred telephone menu systems and the use of chatbots/virtual agents would also be piloted. Chatbots would be accessible 24 hours a day, seven days a week and also had the functionality to log into systems and enter data. It was confirmed that the council's website could already be accessed in a large number of different languages.

Addressing the committee's queries on the Harlesden Community Hub pilot, Sadie East advised that this had been running two days a week for six months and proposals were being developed to roll out a similar model elsewhere in the borough. The pilot had been delivered in partnership with voluntary organisations and had been positively received by the community. The council was working with the Brent Community Advice Network to ensure that it was clear to customers using the service which members of staff could provide advice and which members of staff could provide more basic support. Peter Gadsdon advised that the pilot had helped to identify what services and support were needed locally to ensure a consistent offer could be deployed across the borough. Althea Loderick emphasised that the Customer Promise underpinned the work of all Council staff and this was reiterated at every opportunity from inductions and appraisals through to the Forward Together sessions.

Peter Gadsdon explained that the council's Client Index system combined data from a large number of back-office systems and was used extensively by Fraud, Audit, Housing Benefit and Council Tax teams. Though useful, the Client Index was limited in its ability to facilitate predictive analysis. However, the council had been developing a product via IBM which would draw together data from the client index and other key data sets from the council and its partners including schools, the Youth Offending Service, Police, the Home Office and Health. This tool enabled the council to identify individuals appearing against multiple risk factors and could therefore be used to identify, for example, children at risk of sexual exploitation or gang activity. It was now being considered how to take this model forward and further expand its application for the council. Peter Gadsdon confirmed that at the point of data collection, the council informed the customer that the information would be shared across council systems. The process was more complex when sharing information between partner organisations and information governance agreements had to be established and privacy impact assessments undertaken. The council was prepared for the introduction of the General Data Protection Regulations in May 2018.

The committee further heard from Peter Gadsdon that the council had mirrored data centres from which the council's systems could be restored in the event that one failed. Digital Inclusion was a key strand of the Digital Strategy. It was hoped that as part of an OPDC bid, high-speed fibre broadband would be brought to Park Royal and to Harlesden. During the discussion, the Strategic Director of Resources agreed to seek an update on behalf of the committee from the Head of Customer Services regarding the status of a previously delivered initiative run by the council supporting residents in their use of IT.

The Chair thanked the officers and lead member for their contribution to the meeting.

RESOLVED:

- i) That the Director of Performance, Policy and Partnerships be recommended to amend the list of contact channels for the proposed Channel Strategy, to include 'contact via councillor'.
- ii) That the Director of Performance, Policy and Partnerships ensure that the Digital Strategy and the aligned, Brent Channel Strategy are subject to regular review to ensure they remain fit for purpose and reflect changes to the technological landscape.
- iii) That the Director of Performance, Policy and Partnerships ensure that monitoring is undertaken of the volume of contacts by channel to enable the council to better respond to any evident changes in preference for particular contact channels.

## 8. **Review of Recycling Rates in Brent**

The Chair advised that the committee had undertaken a site visit to the Abbey Road, Brent Reuse and Recycling Centre in preparation for this item.

At the invitation of the Chair, Councillor Southwood (Lead Member for Environment) introduced the report and advised that it reflected on the challenge to the council to sustainably maintain recycling rates against an increasing proportion of flats in the borough. It was explained that people living in flats found it hard to recycle and this was a key element of the challenge faced by the council in maintaining recycling rates. Amar Dave (Strategic Director, Regeneration and Environment), Chris Whyte (Operational Director, Environmental Services), Simon Finney (Head of Environmental Improvement) and Kelly Eaton (Public Realm Policy and Projects Manager) were also present to address the committee's queries.

In the subsequent discussion, members highlighted that whilst the number of bulky waste requests had reduced, there had been no change in the total tonnage to Abbey Road and sought comment on this trend. Kelly Eaton confirmed that bulky waste requests had reduced from 80 to 20 per day since the Bulky Waste charge was introduced. However, there had not been a significant increase in visitor numbers or alternative methods of taking bulky waste items to the Abbey Road site and further work, which would form part of the six month review of the service, was required to better understand this trend.

Members further questioned why the council was not being bolder in its recycling targets, citing the 100 per cent targets of some American cities and noting without endorsing, the enforcement tactic employed by some boroughs of charging residents for putting recyclable materials in to their black bins. The committee questioned why Brent had one of the lowest rates of recycling out of the six authorities in the West London Waste Authority and, noting that Brent residents were no longer able to access the Harrow Waste, Refuse and Recycling Centre free of charge, questioned the co-operation between neighbouring boroughs. A member questioned whether Veolia (the council's public realm contractor) had been

financially penalised for the fall in Brent's recycling rates and queried what strategy was in place to address the issue of recycling in flats. The success of the Envac System which was used in some new developments in Wembley was commented upon and it was queried why this was not a requirement for all new developments. It was also noted that some of the collection systems for estates were not fit for purpose and this needed to be addressed with the council's Housing Team. Further questions were raised regarding Brent's ability to increase charges for Trade Waste and how to better educate Brent's residents regarding the free of charge services to address illegal dumping.

In response, Chris Whyte advised that the legislative framework in America was more beneficial to absolute targets, permitting enforcement fines for non-compliance. Simon Finney outlined the enforcement powers under the Environmental Protection Act and advised that the requirements of taking enforcement action under these powers was not, in general, proportional to the offence. The council's focus was therefore on educational outreach as built into the requirements of Veolia's contract. Chris Whyte confirmed that Veolia were financially penalised for not meeting their objectives for diverting waste from landfill and that this had equated to £1million. He further emphasised that the focus of the West London Waste Authority was on waste minimisation, not merely recycling and this was reflected in the council's approach. Councillor Southwood stated that the team was proud of maintaining recycling rates against Brent's population increase. Chris Whyte highlighted that neighbouring boroughs did not necessarily provide a useful comparison for recycling rates and rather, it was more telling to compare with boroughs with similar characteristics particularly in terms of housing stock and demographics. It was agreed that the Envac system worked well and that the main issue for developers in deciding whether to install the system was the infrastructure costs involved. Applying pressure through the planning system could help support greater uptake of the system for new developments.

Discussing the Harrow Waste, Refuse and Recycling Centre, Councillor Southwood expressed disappointment at the charge which had been but in place for non-Harrow residents and advised that she would hold further discussion with her counterpart in Harrow. She acknowledged however, that the charge had been put in place in order to manage the number of visits to the popular site. Chris Whyte advised that this centre was owned and operated by Harrow, all other waste and recycling centres across the six authorities were managed by the West London Waste Authority. As a consequence of this, Brent Council was not able to directly set commercial waste charges, nor create a competitive market against neighbouring centres.

#### RESOLVED:

- i) That the Strategic Director, Regeneration and Environment and Lead Member for Environment ensure that the promotion of the council's Recycling App is maximised and give consideration to the training of members in the use of the app to enable members to share this knowledge with Brent's residents.
- ii) That the Chair of the committee write to the Chair of the Planning Committee and the Head of Planning, Transport and Licensing, to communicate the

committee's view that Brent's Planning system should require the installation of Envac systems in new developments where suitable.

- iii) That an item be added to the committees work programme for the municipal year 2018/19 on waste management for flats, high-rise flats and estates.

## 9. **Review of Trading Standards' Role and Priority Areas**

The Chair advised that the committee had visited the Trading Standards team in preparation for this item and welcomed Councillor Miller (Lead Member for Stronger Communities), Amar Dave (Strategic Director, Regeneration and Environment), Simon Legg (Senior Regulatory Service Manager), Samuel Abdullahi (Acting Team Leader ) and Anu Prashar (Senior Prosecutor).

At the invitation of the Chair, Councillor Miller introduced the report reviewing the role and priorities of the Trading Standards Service (TS). It was noted that many of the outputs of the service had a direct impact on Brent residents, helping people often in extremely vulnerable circumstances. The TS had operated on a joint consortium basis between the London Borough of Brent and the London Borough of Harrow for over 50 years, with Brent acting as the host authority. The committee heard that TS performed the statutory role of a 'weights and measures authority' with the responsibility of enforcing more than 250 pieces of legislation covering a wide ranging remit. Councillor Miller advised that the budget for TS had reduced significantly in recent years, whilst demand had continued to increase and welcomed the committee's views regarding priorities for the service going forward.

During members' discussion, the committee sought further detail on spend-to-save opportunities for the service, referencing the Proceeds of Crime (PoC) Act 2002 and the Home Office incentivisation scheme as a potential source of income. A query was raised regarding the TS's scope to take enforcement action against ticket touts. Members queried whether the TS worked with the voluntary sector, particularly in relation to raising awareness around fraud and scams and supporting victims of such acts. A member noted the proliferation of online scams and questioned how the TS had evolved to respond to this trend. Clarification was sought regarding the powers of the TS to prosecute in cases of fraud. Discussing the rising number of acid attack incidents across the country, members questioned how the TS worked with Brent traders regarding the sale of chemicals used in such assaults.

In response to the queries raised, Councillor Miller agreed to explore spend-to-save opportunities but cautioned that there were Home Office controls regarding the way in which income generated through the PoC Act 2002 could be applied in this regard. Simon Legg advised that the most appropriate powers to address ticket touting were those belonging to the Licensing Team (in relation to illegally trading without the appropriate street trading license) and the Police's powers under the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 (prevents the reselling of tickets to avoid opposing fans creating matters of public order). The TS did work with the voluntary sector including Age UK and Citizens Advice but noted that much of the work undertaken by the TS was done so in line with its statutory responsibilities. Online scams were reported via ActionFraud, a national fraud and cyber crime reporting centre. The TS also had a dedicated standalone computer to allow officers to go through the details of online scams without leaving a cyber footprint of



their investigation. It was emphasised that scams still took place in person, face to face and not just online. Anu Prashar clarified that whilst the TS had no powers under the Fraud Act, in many cases could pursue prosecution using powers available due to breaches of other Trading Standards legislation. Councillor Miller advised that much of the work with Brent's traders regarding the sale of chemicals used in acid attacks was about building relationships with those business and providing educational material to increase understanding of the types of materials used.

The Chair thanked the Lead Member and officers for their responses.

RESOLVED:

- i) That the Strategic Director, Regeneration and Environment and Lead Member for Stronger Communities be asked to take into consideration the committee's view that the priorities for the Trading Standards Service be underpinned by an invest-to-save rationale and a commitment to protecting Brent's vulnerable residents..
- ii) That the Strategic Director, Regeneration and Environment and Lead Member for Stronger Communities ensure that an analysis is undertaken of the potential invest-to-save opportunities for the Trading Standards Services and report the findings to the committee in due course.

10. **Any other urgent business**

None.

The meeting closed at 9.55 pm

M KELCHER  
Chair