

Welcome to the second meeting of this year's Resources and Public Realm Scrutiny Committee.

In addition to confirming the work programme of the committee, this meeting will focus on three important issues which we are sure are of interest to people across Brent. This report summarises how the committee chose these topics and the additional investigative work we have been undertaking to prepare for this meeting.

## **Resurfacing and road repairs contract**

### **Why we commissioned this topic**

There are three main reasons why the committee was interested in investigating this issue.

Firstly, the state of Brent's street scene is of significant interest to all of our constituents and one of the most frequent issues raised as casework with councillors. Based on this feedback, it is clear to us that many people in Brent have clear concerns about how our resurfacing and repairs work is prioritised and carried out. It is therefore exactly the kind of issue we should be investigating as a priority.

Secondly, the contract that Brent currently has with Conway to provide this service is due to expire in 2021. Therefore, at some point in the very near future Brent will have to decide how it will commission and manage this service in the medium to long term. Scrutiny can therefore add value at this stage in the process by reviewing what has worked well, and what has worked poorly, in the current contract, and making recommendations for the future.

Thirdly, it is essential that members of the committee begin to develop a knowledge and expertise around how the council negotiates and oversees contracts for major services. This is because, in 2023 several of the council's biggest contracts are due to expire. Scrutinising how the council will renew or replace these will be a key task for the committee. Gaining an understanding of a contract at this stage will be invaluable when working towards this wider goal.

### **Additional investigation**

On 7 August half of the committee attended a special focus session with officers who manage the contract and the relevant cabinet member. This was an excellent opportunity for us to get a detailed look at how relationships between Conway and Brent work on a daily basis and for us to tease out some of the important issues we may wish to examine more closely at the committee meeting.

In particular we discussed the prioritisation process for defects, the reputational risks inherent in contracting this service, and overall budgetary constraints.

At the public meeting we will question representatives of Conway about their work and performance, before moving onto an assessment of longer term options with officers and the cabinet member. The session we held in early August was extremely helpful preparation for this work.

## **Review of new positions**

### **Why we commissioned this topic**

Scrutiny which takes place just after a decision has been made by the cabinet is usually ineffectual. For scrutiny to be truly effective it should either review a decision after some time has passed - and therefore when there is enough evidence and experience to analyse and suggest further reform - or before a decision is made so that pre-scrutiny recommendations can be made.

It is with these principles in mind that we have brought forward this item. Around a year ago, as part of the wider move to a regional hub model of delivering services, Brent created two new positions within the council.

- Neighbourhood Managers cover each of the Brent Connects localities and have responsibility for ensuring that environmental, community and other council services are delivered effectively in their areas
- Town Centre Managers are connected to a specific town centre with responsibility for growing and developing the economy and future of the high street in their area

It is now the perfect time to assess how successful these new positions have been, particularly as the council is now considering expanding on the hub model and recruiting new Town Centre Managers.

### **Additional investigation**

Often, at our formal public meetings, the committee only gets to question and hear from senior officers or members who developed the policy in question. This is completely understandable as these are the people ultimately accountable for council decisions.

However, in this coming year we want to ensure that we also hear from those delivering services "on the coal face" so that we can get as many perspectives as possible to inform our recommendations. With this in mind we organised a focus group with those officers currently in the roles to understand exactly which challenges they face.

This was held on 28 August in the Civic Centre. Half of the committee were in attendance and able to question those officers in the roles about their day to day work. Topics of particular interest to the committee included the relationship between the two roles, the balance between proactive and reactive work and how the business community can grow to trust the council.

We were also excited to learn about plans to promote the unique selling points of each of our town centres to make them destinations for shoppers and tourists from far and wide.

## **Channel Shift**

### **Why we commissioned this topic**

However strange it might sound today, it is important to remember that the pace of technological change will never again be this slow. Even in the last few years residents'

expectations of how the council should interact with them and how they should receive services have changed dramatically, with many people expecting digital as default.

Delivering services through these channels, rather than in person or over the phone, also has the potential to make significant savings for Brent at a time of continuing austerity and the imminent end of the block grant.

At the same time, some residents are intimidated by these changes and may miss out if they do not have the skills to access services in new ways. The council are busy developing strategies to address these difficult issues which impact upon people across Brent, and therefore we want to take this opportunity to join these discussions and add value to the process.

### **Additional investigation**

The committee was particularly interested to see how some of our most vulnerable residents wish to interact with the council. We therefore organised a trip to visit the Harlesden Hub at the local library. This is a weekly drop in service where local people can gain advice and support from officers and partners in the voluntary sector.

We were very impressed with the hub model and the dedication of council officers and partners from organisations like Advice for Renters, Crisis Brent and the Bosnia and Herzegovina Community Advice Centre. The Hub seems to work because it is not branded as a purely council initiative and because it is situated in a local facility which most people in the community will have visited at some point. These two factors ensure it is a trusted and well known service and does not hold the level of intimidation a trip to the Civic Centre in "far away" Wembley would have for some residents of Harlesden, Willesden and the surrounding areas.

This is not to say that the Hub is not extremely professional. We were particularly impressed with the front desk and triage services which help those people walking into the Hub for the first time. If the Hub model is rolled out, we believe such a service would definitely be necessary in other locations as well.

It is clear that the Hub plays a role in preparing people for channel shift by helping people to access services online (though there are ICT issues at the current facilities) but perhaps more needs to be done to track people who use this service to ensure these skills are maintained and developed. The relationship between the Hub and the Brent Start IT classes should also be further examined.

Overall though we were hugely impressed and would like to thank all of the people who gave up their time to speak to us.

### **Mattress tagging**

The last Chair's Report discussed the idea of mattress tagging as a deterrent against illegal rubbish dumping in the private rented sector. Since this report I have held a further fruitful meeting with the relevant cabinet member and senior officers to discuss the idea further. All

agreed it would be a helpful tool in the council's armoury when it comes to fighting illegal rubbish dumping, but there are also significant logistical and legal problems.

We agreed that the report already due to come to committee in April on illegal rubbish dumping would be expanded to include an assessment of this idea and other steps targeted specifically at dumping in the private rented sector. This will give officers the time they need to further investigate the idea.