

Chair's Report

Resources and Public Realm Scrutiny Committee

March 2020

Good evening, and welcome to the March meeting of the Resources and Public Realm Scrutiny Committee.

Budget Update

As our last committee meeting focussed particularly on Brent's budget for 2020/21, I'd like to begin this report by updating members on my work to push the budget scrutiny recommendations we agreed on the night.

I attended Cabinet on 10 February to present these recommendations in person and to ask the Cabinet to accept them.

Before the Budget Council meeting on 19 February, I received a draft written response outlining the administration's response to each of our points. This is now due to go to Cabinet to be formally adopted and then will be sent back to our committee for consideration at our April meeting.

Therefore, the process of budget scrutiny continues even after the budget is formally set, and backbenchers will continue to have an opportunity to highlight issues or concerns if they attend those two meetings.

The recommendation which has attracted most contention and attention was recommendation 8. To recap, this read: **'The council should ringfence the money generated by the one-off sale of additional burial plots for a programme of street tree planting and maintenance.'**

To give some context to this recommendation, the Regeneration and Environment Department often spends less than its headline budget for the year. This is not because it declines to spend all of the money allocated to it, but more often because it generates more income than it spends through fees and charges. These include access to swimming pools, collection of large bulky waste items and funeral services.

However, normally this is just used to make up overspends in other departments (usually Children and Young People).

We are anticipating another overspend this year. The original recommendation in our budget scrutiny panel report was some of this overspend from 2019/20 (specifically that bit of the overspend raised by the sale of additional burial plots, which we heard in evidence would be approximately £700k) be ring-fenced for tree planting and no other purpose.

This was precisely because we understood it would be a one off sum (you can't re-sell burial plots every year!) and trees can be planted as a capital project and help to aid the climate emergency and the air quality crisis we have in Brent. It could also be used

to help overcome the tree inequality in Brent whereby some of our poorest and most polluted wards have the lowest number of trees on their streets.

I knew this was quite ambitious, but we have an air quality crisis and we need to push ambitious plans to tackle it.

At the meeting where I presented these recommendations to Cabinet, the Leader of the Council made the following change to the budget: **'To note the report from the Budget Scrutiny Panel in Appendix D of the report. In addition, Cabinet agreed at the meeting to recommend to Council that any overall underspend across the General Fund accrued at the end of March 2020 be ringfenced and bought forward as proposals for spending on the climate change emergency.'**

This was then added to the papers that budget council approved. This is different to what we initially asked for in two main ways.

Firstly, it refers to the general fund, so any total underspend left over in March (i.e. once money from R&E has already been used to fill in overspends in other department) rather than a specific fund.

Secondly, it guarantees the money will be spent on the climate emergency as a whole - policies to combat climate change would include tree planting but not be limited to it.

This means that ultimately the outcome will be determined by whether we have an overall underspend or not, and how the cabinet decides to spend it. But at least we know that any extra money will not simply be moved around the existing departments but will be dedicated to this most important of issues.

I do believe, and I said this in my speech at Budget Council on 19 February, that next year's budget will need to prioritise funds to combat the air quality crisis in particular. This may require top slicing of budgets, ring fencing of funds and prioritisation of capital spend.

The Air Quality Task Group - commissioned by my committee and ably chaired by Cllr Stephens - will play a leading role in this work. I know some colleagues were disappointed that the Cabinet only 'noted' this report when it was presented to them in January, rather than giving responses to each recommendation.

However, I can assure them that serious attention is being given to the report by officers and a full in-depth response is being produced which we should be able to share with you soon. This work will have a key influence on the Climate Change Emergency Strategy which is due to be produced this year. I have also spoken to the Cabinet member responsible to ensure that this strategy comes back to my committee for pre-scrutiny when ready. This is an issue I will keep working on.

Recommendations tracker

On a similar note, I have had some very fruitful recent meetings with Brent's new Assistant Chief Executive, Shazia Hussain. She has taken over responsibilities for scrutiny.

The main issue I have asked her to address is follow up of recommendations. When recommendations are contained within a task group report we have been able to get a full response and follow up on implementation down the line, as described above in relation to the budget scrutiny panel. However, when recommendations are made orally at a public committee meeting follow up is patchy at best. There needs to be a standing item at Cabinet meetings – 'consideration of recommendations from scrutiny' where these are properly responded to. These responses also need to be written down and sent back the committee, so all are clear on what is happening.

Shazia's team are working with me to finalise a system which will achieve this, and I hope to be able to report back to all members soon.

Mattress Tagging

Speaking of recommendations made by this committee, many members will remember the site visit to Brent's Household Recycling Centre in early 2018 where we came face to face with the mountain of dumped mattresses which had been collected from Brent's streets.



This led to a lot of thinking amongst committee members on how we could disincentivise such dumping and our recommendation that the council should initiate a scheme of mattress tagging, so mattresses could be traced back to the person who bought them if illegally dumped.

You can read more about this idea in an article from the time here: <https://www.harrowtimes.co.uk/news/16347543.brent-councillor-cooks-up-mattress-tagging-idea/>.

I was also interviewed on BBC Radio London at the time about this idea, the first time a scrutiny recommendation has gained radio coverage across the capital, as far as I am aware.

I am pleased to say that, once again, where Brent leads Britain follows, and the Local Government Association have now called for mandatory mattress tagging as a disincentive against mattress dumping. You can read more here:

<https://www.local.gov.uk/lga-mandatory-mattress-recycling-needs-imposing-manufacturers-reduce-fly-tipping>

Now that we have some national impetus around the plan, I hope that Brent council can play a leading role in making this a reality and coordinate with other councils to tackle this blight.

Tonight's Agenda

Finally, I want to highlight some of the key items we will be examining tonight.

Firstly, will be finalising the membership of the task group we initiated in January, with Cllr Fleur Donnelly-Jackson as chair, to look at domestic abuse and violence against women in girls, in line with the council's priorities.

Then we will move on to scrutinise the council's cycling strategy. This strategy is due to come to an end in early 2021 and so now is an opportune moment for the committee to review how the previous strategy has succeeded, and what additional steps may be required in future.

The committee has demonstrated a sustained and long standing interest in air quality, and there is no doubt that getting people out of their cars is a key way to improve the situation. Making it easier for people to cycle is obviously one way to achieve this, and so it will remain an important issue for the committee and people of Brent.

Finally, we will examine Brent's parks strategy. Enough time has now elapsed since the council adopted its new "meadows" scheme for us to be able to consider the impact this has had in our many parks. We are also interested in the strategies that the council will adopt to make best use of our parks as we hope to attract more visitors through our year as the London Borough of Culture.

To help prepare committee members for this particular item, we arranged a site visit to a local park on Friday 6 March, where we were able to question those officers involved in setting our parks strategy.

Cllr Matt Kelcher

Chair, Resources and Public Realm Scrutiny Committee