



MINUTES OF THE RESOURCES AND PUBLIC REALM SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
Held as an Online Virtual Meeting on Tuesday 18 January 2022 at 6.00 pm

PRESENT: Councillor Mashari (Chair), Councillor Kansagra (Vice-Chair) and Councillors S Choudhary, Conneely, Johnson, Kabir, Miller, and Shah

Also Present: Councillors McLennan, Knight, Ketan Sheth, Krupa Sheth and Tatler.

1. Apologies for absence and clarification of alternate members

Apologies for absence were received from:

- Councillor Long

2. Declarations of interests

None.

3. Deputations (if any)

None.

4. Minutes of the previous meeting

It was **RESOLVED** that the minutes of the previous meeting held on 10 November 2021 be approved as a correct record.

5. Matters arising (if any)

None.

6. Topical issue – Healthy Neighbourhoods

The Chair explained that this topic had been brought forward by Councillors Krupa Sheth (Lead Member for Environment, Brent Council and Shama Tatler (Lead Member for Regeneration, Property & Planning, Brent Council) and they introduced the item to the Committee.

Councillor Tatler noted that this item was raised as the result of a Cabinet paper, and was a policy area that was introduced following emergency transport initiatives from central Government. The Council had explored an ambitious programme around school streets and healthy neighbourhoods; and following significant community interest in the matter the Council committed to a full engagement and independent consultation process. One of the overwhelming responses from residents was noted as reducing traffic, improving air quality as well as road safety. Residents had also expressed a desire to be involved in the co design of these initiatives, which was being

embarked upon and continued. It was also announced that following analysis of the consultation on the new school streets programme, there would be 26 school streets made permanent in Brent, which was a total of 28 schools. This would mean that young people were able to walk more safely and active travel would be encouraged across Brent. It was explained that the name 'Healthy Neighbourhoods' was used in order to have a broader scope from which to consult with residents. The Council was also looking at establishing a team dedicated to healthy streets and parking agenda, which would look at how the Mayor of London's objectives were supported.

The Committee was then invited to raise questions on the information provided, which focussed on a number of key areas, as highlighted below:

- Regarding the funding from central government, it was asked how much funding was received for the school streets project and whether CCTV had been utilised in the deployment of the scheme. It was noted that the money was not specifically for school streets but also for the Healthy Neighbourhoods programme; this money had not come from the Brent revenue account but from Central Government. It was noted that due to the project requiring to be delivered at pace, rather than CCTV, planters and bollards had been a more effective solution. A policy was now being explored as to how CCTV cameras could be introduced within active travel schemes.
- It was asked how much funding had been received; it was noted that the funding had been received in different phases. It was noted that there was around £130,000 was received in the first instance.
- It was asked how the maintenance of school streets would work, to which it was answered that the status of new school streets was dependent on the financial status of TFL. The Committee was updated that when ANPR cameras were installed, this would be funded by TFL. Based on the assessments of the first two trials, the monies from Penalty Charge Notices (PCNs) would cover the cost of the cameras.
- In relation to school cameras, the Committee asked for an explanation as to why these were being installed; it was updated that these were in place to stop non-residential traffic from entering school pickup and drop off areas. Residents who lived on those roads would still have access, as well as exemptions such as blue badge holders.
- In relation to Project Centre Ltd and Living Streets, the Committee asked for clarification on the cost to date relating to work they had undertaken, to which it was answered that with Living Streets, this had totalled £25,000, and the technical assessments for the Healthy Neighbourhoods scheme had totalled around £28,000. This was money that had been bid for from TFL grants.
- In relation to a query around Living Streets' objectivity, it was answered that Living Streets were experienced in the area of active travel. Whilst it was acknowledged that the organisation had a particular view on active travel, this was also shared by the Council. In terms of engagement, there were lessons to be learned about how this was conducted, particularly as this was a divisive policy area.
- Considering consultation, it was noted whilst there was learning to be gained from this; it would be useful to investigate this further. A quote from Brent Cycling Campaign was highlighted, asserting that the Council had not acknowledged its responsibility in the failure of the implementation of the programme. With that in

mind, it was asked whether, as a Council, the challenges in the original consultation had an effect on the negative outcomes received from the public. It was answered that the speed of the scheme would not have been as fast if Brent were in control, and it was accepted that the ambitious plans may have been overwhelming to residents. It was also acknowledged that resident buy in was crucial, and the learning was around how to make the next iteration of this policy better, including that a one size fits all policy was not practical in Brent. It was posed that, though it was not Council core funding, the consultation could be perceived as wasteful, to which it was responded that 28 school streets ought not to be considered a failure and that learning had been taken for the Council. It was also noted as important learning in line with the Council's aim to improve air quality and become carbon neutral by 2032.

- In response to the consultation, it was noted that the Council had been mandated by the Government to hit target dates, and therefore the responsibility lay with the Government in terms of the consultation. Had the Council had the chance to conduct elements, it may have been better received. In relation to the quote from the Brent Cycling Campaign, it was noted that the Council had regular conversations with cyclists in relation to these policies.
- The Committee asked for more detail regarding lessons learned and how this would affect future consultations; as well as the Council's understanding between collaboration and consultation. In terms of lessons learned, one example cited was how air quality data was collected, as well as educating residents around air quality. In terms of consultation, it was stated that once the ANPR policies had been established, that there would be collaboration with residents and this could be brought back to scrutiny. It was also stated that a new service had been created recently to establish this new policy direction throughout 2022.
- Considering the consultation and collaboration around Healthy Neighbourhoods, it was asked whether this reflected consultation across the Council, to which it was answered that this would be better directed towards Councillor Knight.
- It was asked if the initial consultation should have been ongoing with residents; it was noted that online consultation was open to all residents and there had been good engagement. It was clarified that the broader consultation structure of the Council was far more collaborative and emphasised co-design, citing the Citizens Lab initiative as well as the Black Community Action Plan.
- In relation to pollution and offsetting traffic, it was asked whether there were statistics available to show this effectiveness, to which it was answered that some schemes were not able to be fully implemented due to Local Ambulance Service requirements. It was reiterated that longer would have been required to ascertain a more detailed plan around collecting data. It was also noted that due to periods of Lockdown, it was not easy to determine the results of schemes.
- In a wider point around consultation, it was asked whether the Council was formally adopting a review of its consultation structures, to which it was clarified that this was not a formal process, but looking at how this consultation and design could be improved.

It was **RESOLVED**:

- (1) That the following areas for improvement be noted:

- For the Council to demonstrate how the lessons learned in relation to public consultation undertaken on the Schools Streets and Healthy (Low Traffic) Neighbourhood schemes will inform the Council's wider consultation and engagement approach

(2) The Committee made the following information requests:

- To receive a breakdown of the funding received by Brent Council for the Schools Streets and Healthy (Low Traffic) Neighbourhood schemes and the proportion of this funding that remains unspent.

7. Covid-19 Recovery Report

Councillor Margaret McLennan (Deputy Leader, Lead Member for Resources and Children's Safeguarding, Early Help and Social Care, Brent Council) and Councillor Shama Tatler (Lead Member for Regeneration, Property & Planning, Brent Council) presented these reports. It was noted that the pandemic had resulted in serious implications for Brent residents; the borough had the most amount of people on furlough, digital access for residents was low, as well as food and fuel poverty. The work from the Transformation Team at the Council was praised, as well as that of Citizens Lab and Age UK. This work had resulted in granular, real time work which enabled the Council to set up the Residents Support Fund and other funds such as the Household Support Fund. Coming out of the pandemic, this work had been able to identify residents with the most issues, as well as making communities more resilient. In future, funding was available to kick-start Brent's economy, looking at how businesses could be supported, as well as additional education provision. The schemes carried out by the Council were delivered across Customer Services and in Community Hubs. As a result, the organisation of the service was being considered, with collaboration in mind. It was also noted that the procurement strategy tied into this report, including affordable workplaces and inclusive growth. It was noted as being vital to provide residents with digital access so that they could achieve their goals and ambitions. Brent's Council Tax Support scheme was also highlighted as being one of the best in the country, allowing the Covid-19 funding to be utilised elsewhere. However, the Committee were asked to note that the funding and support to residents was due to end in March 2022, though support for businesses would extend beyond this date. To date, there had been 4000 applications to the Residents Support Fund, of which 1500 applications had been successful. In future, it was planned to make the application process for the Council's schemes more accessible to residents.

The Committee was then invited to raise questions on the update provided, which focussed on a number of key areas as highlighted below:

- The Committee noted that it would be useful to have a clear picture of the total grants received, the money spent to date, the monies remaining and the outcomes from the schemes. It was noted that the breakdown of each particular grant would be available for the Committee.

- The Committee asked about the deadlines for personal and business support, and what would happen if that money was not spent by the March deadline; it was answered that the business grants would extend beyond this financial year, with the Household Support Fund ending on 31 March. 60% of the grant had been given to residents, with 40% remaining. If this money was not spent by the deadline, this would be returned to Central Government.
- Further to this point, the Committee asked if the Council were confident of spending the remaining money on the Household Support Fund, to which it was answered that due to the level of demand there was confidence that this would be spent.
- In the context of wider budget cuts, it was asked how much of the Covid-19 grants were 'new' money and not received through previous funding streams. It was clarified that all Covid-19 funding that had come through had been new money and had not affected other areas in the Council's budget. It was clarified that the money that had been received from the Government for these schemes would have to be paid back in some form over the coming years.
- A question was asked regarding the Voluntary Sector's role and the funding provided to Food Banks. It was queried whether this had created barriers for organisations already carrying out these services and whether work streams had been duplicated; it was clarified that the monies outlined within the report were additional monies provided by the Government, some of which went to schools, as well as food and fuel vouchers for residents. There was also a group formed by the Council comprising of all Food Banks within the borough, whereby if an organisation signed up they could be provided with money from Central Government via the Council.
- Referencing feedback from Community Groups arising from a Budget Scrutiny Group discussion, it was asked whether the amount of money provided to Food Banks was thought to be sufficient, as well as querying whether work streams were in fact duplicated by the Council. It was noted that this work was collaborative rather than duplicating, as part of a process to understand the needs of residents. In terms of the funding, this was noted as being part of the Winter Support Fund, with the money used to support Food Banks and supporting residents who attended Food Banks. In terms of distributing food to residents, it was clarified that at the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020, the Council delivered food parcels to Clinically Extremely Vulnerable (CEV), which was an emergency reaction and not a precedent. The discussions during the pandemic with Food Banks were as a result of demand where charities felt they were unable to cope with rising demand.
- The Committee asked how it was decided whether the money spent had been successfully invested, particularly relating to employment and education. In terms of Brent Hubs, it was noted that the number of residents supported was measured, as well as measuring and tracking outcomes. It was noted as complex to determine whether issues had been resolved as many residents attending the Hubs had multiple and complex issues. It was updated that there was a new system which would track outcomes in areas such as supporting residents coming out of debt and coming into employment; as well as preventative work around issues such as homelessness. It was also updated that the employment team had a new CRM system which was in place prior to the pandemic, with several thousand people registered. Updates included the number of jobs people were placed into, as well as the duration and whether they received a living wage.

- In relation to how many members were in Brent's Food Bank network and what the funding provided, it was clarified that there were thought to be seven members of the network currently, and that the funding could be spent on food as well as infrastructure, transport and storage.
- In considering digital support, it was asked whether the springboard training was free, and if so where it was advertised. This was noted as a result of social value and ethical procurement, including courses in how to write a CV and beginning coding, with 500 people signed up free of charge. In terms of advertisement, this was publicised on Sky News and it was being promoted by the Council. Springboard had also been promoted through partner organisations and was tied in with digital device schemes with residents and businesses.
- A question was raised around the BuyBrent app and the digital pilot scheme, particularly how outcomes were measured. It was clarified that Town Centre Managers had reached out to businesses around the BuyBrent app, with 2000 downloads so far. Residents and businesses' activity and transactions were able to be tracked, as well as anecdotal discussions with businesses.
- It was queried how BuyBrent and other schemes would help the local economy, to which it was answered that 5000 people had enrolled in Brent Start and thousands using the Springboard app. It was stressed that BuyBrent was not deployed in isolation, but as part of an overall package of skills and employment support. In terms of local businesses, there was a focus on enabling digital support as well as promoting local businesses more widely. As a wider point, it was stated that the goal was for Brent residents to spend money within the borough through the BuyBrent app.
- In a strategic point around unemployment and redundancies, it was asked whether conversations were ongoing with the top 5 largest employers in the borough and what work was happening to support these businesses. It was recognised that strategic conversations needed to be established with Brent Businesses, which had previously been carried out through the Brent Business Board. In terms of support, it was updated that support was offered around digital access, green initiatives as well as affordable workplace strategies. Town Centre Managers were also working with Landlords to establish vacancy rates in commercial properties.
- In relation to unemployment levels in Brent, it was posited that Brent had higher levels of unemployment than many London boroughs; this was noted as being a reason why Brent was vulnerable to the effects of the pandemic. Discussions with Brent businesses around barriers they face had taken place and could be shared with the Scrutiny Committee.
- A query was raised around contracts that had been provided outside of regular procurement rules outlined in 3.10 of the report, it was suggested for a list of these contract awards to be provided. Any contracts outside of the procurement rules would have been delegated under emergency powers and would have been documented within the Council's decision-making process. These decisions were a result of the fast moving landscape of Covid-19.
- It was asked whether the Covid-19 grants had contributed to help with domestic abuse against women and girls, to which it was clarified that these grants were primarily for support with food, fuel and utilities. However, there had been work conducted alongside the Family Wellbeing Centres in Brent to assess where families required extra support, including domestic violence.

- It was asked why Brent's wages had decreased on average during the pandemic, to which it was answered this was likely due to the types of jobs which had changed, as well as those in higher paid jobs losing their jobs.

It was **RESOLVED**:

(1) That the following areas for improvement be noted:

- To receive a breakdown of the Covid-19 grant funding received by the Council including:
 - a) Total received
 - b) Total spent
 - c) Total unspent
 - d) Outputs/outcomes
 - e) Cut off points for grant applications and spend
 - f) Total allocated from Council core funding/additional grant funding
- To receive a breakdown of the outputs/outcomes (in line with outputs/outcomes provided for other work in report) for Covid-19 support provided by:
 - a) Brent Hubs
 - b) Financial Inclusion and Welfare workstream
- To receive a list of organisations that have signed up to the Foodbank Network and details on where the organisations are located within the borough.
- To receive a list of contracts that have been given outside of the Council's procurement rules during the Covid-19 pandemic.
- To receive a list of the Council's live strategies.

(2) The Committee made the following information requests:

- For the Council to consider increasing the amount of grant funding provided to Brent foodbanks.
- For the Council to engage with the largest employers within the borough to seek assurance around potential future job losses. If necessary, appropriate support should be given to large employers to ensure job losses are limited.
- For the Council's Town Managers to assess how many local businesses are in need of "critical support" and increase support for these businesses in line with their need.
- For the Council to ensure that Covid-19 related financial support for victims of domestic abuse and violence is well communicated to residents.
- For the Council to consider commissioning business and/or financial professionals to provide support to those high street businesses that may be struggling to recover from the financial impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

8. Budget Scrutiny

Councillor Margaret McLennan (Lead Member for Finance, Brent Council) introduced the report which provided an update regarding Q3 updates, as well as updates on the various departments of the Council. It was updated that forecasts were on track for the Council to be able to present a balanced budget. It was noted that within Children and Young People, there was an outcome pressure amounting to £6.9m, with the high needs block and EHCP (Educational Healthcare Plans) costs rising. This was in addition to £1.5 million provided to unaccompanied asylum seeking schoolchildren. It was updated that money from the Dedicated Schools Grant would be recouped in later years, however this would lead to an overall deficit of £14m. In terms of the Council's savings profile, it was updated that £8.5 million in cuts would be met, in line with the Council's most recent budget. Therefore, the main area where a deficit was seen was within CYP.

The Committee was then invited to raise questions on the update provided, which focussed on a number of key areas as highlighted below:

- In relation to the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) asylum seeking schoolchildren deficit, it was asked how could this be sustained in the future if the Government would not fund this. It was answered that the DSG would be recovered in later years, and that the Council and other Local Authorities across the country were lobbying the Government regarding the deficit around asylum seeking schoolchildren. It was also explained that Local Authorities that do have a deficit had a deficit recovery plan, which would be put in place to attempt to bring growth down to a sustainable level. It was noted that reducing this deficit was a key priority within the finance agenda for the Council and nationally. At the recent Local Government Finance Conference, it was acknowledged that lobbying and advocating would need to take place for this to happen. The Committee were also assured that this was not having an impact on current provision within the high needs block, with Cabinet recently approving the investment in 427 special needs places within Brent.
- The Committee raised whether there was an underspend in the Black Community Action Plan and why this had happened. It was clarified that many projects had been delayed due to the impact of Covid-19. The money had been allocated however it was delayed in being spent.
- In relation to the risks in the Q3 financial report, it was asked whether an equality impact assessment had been made for the reduction of bus routes for disabled adults. It was clarified that these services had not been reduced, but may not have been utilised in the current financial year and that a decision had not been made around reducing those routes.
- In relation to 1.12 of the Scrutiny report, it was asked whether the Social Care precept reduction from 2% to 1% would have an impact on service delivery. It was noted that this was factored into the draft budget for 2022/2023. However, it was noted that whilst the precept provided ring-fenced funding for Adult Social Care, this did not cover the totality of pressures or growth surrounding the Department, and only supported a proportion of this. The Government had provided additional Social Care grant funding and although this still resulted in less funding, it still amounted to a balanced budget.

It was **RESOLVED**:

(1) That the following areas for improvement be noted:

- For the Council to continue to lobby central government for a sustainable solution to funding the Dedicated School Grant deficit, with active involvement from Cabinet.

(2) The Committee made the following information requests:

- To receive details of any lobbying and/or media communications undertaken by the Council and other local authorities calling for additional funding to recover the Dedicated School Grant deficit.

9. **Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Scrutiny Task Group Update**

Councillor Promise Knight (Lead Member for Community Safety and Engagement, Brent Council) provided an update on this report. Introducing the report, Members were provided with assurance that issues concerning Violence Against Women and Girls continued to be a top priority. Referencing the Action Plan, it was noted that the vast majority of items had been implemented. It was noted that that corporate funding was increased to VAWG organisations, as well as increased MARAC service provision to meet the demands at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Committee was then invited to raise questions on the update provided, which focussed on a number of key areas as highlighted below:

- The Committee asked what changes had been made to the VAWG strategy, in light of some high profile cases in the last 12 months and new threats that had become known as a result of such cases. It was answered that these cases had informed the work going forward, though the existing work within Brent was already robust. The Council was currently undergoing a consultation process to review the VAWG strategy priorities. More generally, it was acknowledged that Covid-19 had affected the landscape of Community Safety work. As the economy reopened, it was updated that workshops had been conducted with local businesses in relation to the Borough's night-time economy, with input from women and victims of Domestic abuse. The Action Plan was working on feedback around open and public spaces in light of some events in the past 12 months which had been highlighted in the media. This also included work with police partners, not only in terms of investigations but also in community reassurance work.
- Referencing an area of the Action Plan, it was asked for clarity to be provided as to how businesses could participate in this scheme. It was noted that whilst workshops were ongoing with the night time economy, training could be opened

up to a wider variety of businesses. Added to this, Councillor Knight stressed that it was important to develop an inclusive approach to people who could potentially be victims of Domestic Abuse. It was clarified that no community or member of any community was excluded from support within Brent.

- The Committee asked whether outcomes and members numbers of people being reached could be included from training sessions, it was confirmed that this could be provided in future.
- The Committee raised Item 7 on the Action Plan around the number of women in refuge with teenage male children who had been successfully rehoused, and whether this data could be provided. It was confirmed that this data was available and could be provided to the Committee.

It was **RESOLVED**:

(1) That the following areas for improvement be noted:

- For the Council to ensure emphasis is given to the initiatives to support for perpetrators within the VAWG strategy.
- For the Council to ensure that the business training provided to the night time economy (local pubs, bars, restaurants etc.) around supporting vulnerable women and safeguarding is offered more widely to local businesses.

(2) The Committee made the following information requests:

- To receive a breakdown of the corporate training offered to Council staff including:
 - a) Type of training
 - b) Take up of training
 - c) Take up of training by department
 - d) Evaluation measures
- To receive a breakdown of the number of women with older male children housed through the council house-building programme including:
 - a) Total figures
 - b) Type of accommodation
- To receive details of the work undertaken to ensure that domestic abuse and VAWG services are accessible to all residents including those that share a protected characteristic.

8. **Progress Report**

The Scrutiny Progress report, outlined the issues previously considered at the Resources & Public Realm Scrutiny Committee. The Chair noted that the new format of the report was welcomed, which incorporated all activity within the report.

The committee requested further information on the changes implemented as a result of the out-of-hours emergency crisis response review, originally requested at previous meeting held on 10 November 2021.

9. **Forward Plan of Key Decisions**

The Forward Plan of Key Decisions was noted.

10. **Any other urgent business**

None.

The meeting closed at 9.00 pm

Councillor R. Mashari
Chair