

Decisions of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee

5 March 2024

Members Present:-

Councillor Danny Rich (Chair)
Councillor Daniel Thomas (Vice-Chair)

Councillor Edith David	Councillor Paul Lemon
Councillor Dean Cohen	Councillor Arjun Mittra
Councillor Richard Cornelius	Councillor Alex Prager
Councillor Giulia Innocenti	Councillor Ernest Ambe
Councillor Emma Whysall	

Also in attendance
Councillor Zahra Beg
Councillor Ross Houston

1. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 23 January 2024 be approved as a correct record.

2. ABSENCE OF MEMBERS (IF ANY)

None.

3. DECLARATION OF MEMBERS' DISCLOSABLE PECUNIARY INTERESTS AND OTHER INTERESTS (IF ANY)

Councillor Emma Whysall declared a non-pecuniary interest in item 8 (Refugee Resettlement and Asylum Process) as her partner had worked for the Department of Work and Pensions on the Afghan Resettlement Scheme. She advised the Committee that her partner was no longer involved with this work.

4. DISPENSATIONS GRANTED BY THE MONITORING OFFICER

None.

5. PUBLIC COMMENTS AND QUESTIONS (IF ANY)

None.

6. MEMBERS' ITEMS (IF ANY)

None.

7. LOCAL PLAN - MAIN MODIFICATIONS

The Cabinet Member for Homes and Regeneration, Councillor Ross Houston; the Service Director Planning and Building Control, Fabien Gaudin; and the Planning Policy Manager, Nick Lynch, were in attendance to present the item.

The report outlined that following submission of the Local Plan for Independent Examination and the subsequent examination Hearing Sessions, the Inspectors had recommended a series of Main Modifications to the Plan for it to be found sound. The report set out the Schedule of Proposed Modifications required to comply with national planning policies, the London Plan, and local policies (such as the updated Housing Strategy and Net Zero) and sought the Committee's input on these before they were reported to Cabinet on 12 March 2024.

The Cabinet Member for Homes and Regeneration advised the Committee that, as the Plan did not cover a full 15-year period to 2036, there was a requirement that a review of the Plan should commence within a year of adoption.

The Committee noted the removal of the definition of very tall buildings in the proposed modifications. Officers reported that the Inspectors considered that there was no evidence to justify any divergence from London Plan policy. However, the London Plan set out specific design criteria that proposals for tall buildings were required to address and that heights would be determined in response to including locations where the Local Plan considered tall buildings may be appropriate. Concern was expressed at the clustering of tall buildings in certain areas (e.g. town centres such as Edgware). The Cabinet Member for Homes and Regeneration commented that the introduction of the Design Review Panel would improve the quality of high-density developments.

A Member noted the proposed amendment in relation to Water Courses and an assurance was sought that the requirement to contribute towards the de-culverting of rivers would not increase flood risk in the borough, particularly in relation to the Dollis Brook.

In relation to Crossrail 2, the Committee noted that this scheme may have an impact in the future on the Oakleigh Road Depot and it was considered important that the Council protected this infrastructure.

Officers agreed to propose both changes to the Inspectors as Main Modifications to the Plan.

RESOLVED that the Committee:

- 1. Note the contents of the report and the Schedule of Main Modifications (Appendix A) and the Schedule of Additional Modifications (Appendix B).**
- 2. Agree that the comments and concerns relating to de-culverting of water courses and the potential impact of Crossrail 2 as detailed be referred to the meeting of Cabinet on 12 March 2024 for consideration alongside the Schedules of Main and Additional Modifications.**

8. REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT AND ASYLUM PROGRESS

The Cabinet Member for Equalities and the Voluntary and Community Sector, Councillor Zahra Beg; the Deputy Chief Executive, Cath Shaw; the Head of Service - Strategy and Community Participation, Hal Khanom; and the Deputy Head of Strategy, Will Cooper, were in attendance to present the report.

The Cabinet Member for Equalities and the Voluntary and Community Sector informed the Committee that the Council had an important role to play in supporting the resettlement of refugees. She reported that there were currently two schemes being delivered by the Council: the Homes for Ukraine Scheme and the Afghanistan Resettlement Scheme. The Council was also delivering support in Public Health and Early Health in five Home Office contingency hotels and had been caring for unaccompanied minors. She reported that the current concerns related to the high numbers of asylum seekers leaving hotel accommodation and seeking housing in Barnet and the potential impact long term impact on community cohesion.

It was highlighted that the Council was working with the voluntary sector to develop a new citizens gateway to provide support to refugees and asylum seekers.

The Cabinet Member advised the Committee that the Council was working towards achieving Borough of Sanctuary status in the next couple of months.

A Committee Member questioned how the Council could maintain good working relationships with the government in this area. Officers advised that the Council had a good relationship with the Home Office contact. It was noted that the Council had written a letter to the Home Office on the cost of supporting children and young people.

Members asked what the impact of Refugee Week had been and whether the initiative would be supported on an ongoing basis. Officers reported that it was hoped that funding could be found to support Refugee Week in future years. It was noted that there had been no formal feedback but that testimonials had been recorded which were positive.

A Committee Member noted the risk of an asylum hotel closing at short notice and questioned how quickly the Council could react. Officers reported that the minimum notice period was seven days but added that it was hoped that much more notice would be given. It was reported that, if insufficient notice was given, the Council would struggle to place people.

The Committee considered that the Home Office hotel maximisation scheme was problematic and it was welcomed that one of the sites was resisted. It was questioned whether the Council had to support this approach at a borough level. Concern was expressed about the personnel who determined sharing arrangements and whether they had the appropriate level of training, as putting people together who may be vulnerable could be complicated and risky. Officers reported that some residents were given a choice and others were given an ultimatum regarding sharing. The justification was that the Home Office was paying for beds and needed to maximise value for money. It was reported that decisions were taken by hotel management. Home Office hotels were managed locally by Clearspring Ready Homes under a regional contract. The Cabinet Member commented that the Council had limited influence and acknowledged that sharing arrangements could be problematic.

A Member expressed concern that there could potentially be 1,436 asylum seekers that could need housing at short notice and questioned the Council's ability to move them into the private rented sector. Officers reported that they had no influence over Home Office decisions to close hotels.

The Committee questioned how refugee children were accommodated in schools. The Executive Director of Children and Young People advised the Committee that all children had been accommodated in Barnet schools with 95% being placed within the statutory 15-day timeframe. It was noted that there were some age groups which could be challenging (e.g. Year 11). Schools had put on a range of courses on English as a Second Language to support not only asylum hotel children, but also for families from Hong Kong and Ukraine. The overall number of accommodated children in the last two years was around 3,500. The Executive Director of Children and Young People reported that schools did have funding for support including therapy. Assessments for Special Educational Needs could take up to 20 weeks and a lack of background information could be an issue. The Schools' Forum had allocated £1 million of funding for individual resources. Placing children who may require a special school was a particular issue.

It was noted that some former asylum seekers may be rough sleeping and it was questioned why the Council did not have accurate figures. Officers reported that rough sleeping was hard to monitor as there was a set methodology which meant that obtaining a comprehensive picture was difficult. It was identified that, when the Severe Weather Action Protocol was enacted, this was the best way of identifying the actual number; however, an estimate of around one quarter of the total was considered reasonably accurate.

RESOLVED that the Committee:

- 1. Note the contents of the report and request that the Cabinet Member for Equalities and the Voluntary and Community Sector and lead officers note the comments and concerns above when progressing work in this area in the future.**

9. TOWARDS A FAIR BARNET

The Cabinet Member for Equalities and the Voluntary and Community Sector, Councillor Zahra Beg; the Executive Director for Children and Families, Chris Munday; the Assistant Director of Strategy and Communications, Liz Cowie; and the Head of Service - Strategy and Community Participation, Hal Khanom, were in attendance to present the report.

Our Plan for Barnet 2023-2026 set out our vision for tackling inequalities and fighting poverty. The Council had been developing a new external, community focused equalities strategic roadmap, Towards a Fair Barnet, to reflect and align with the ambitions in the plan. The report provided an update on the development of the roadmap and sought the views of the Committee on the proposed approach and potential priorities prior to the submission of the strategic roadmap to Cabinet on 16 April 2024 and Council on 21 May 2024.

A Member considered that there were some inequalities in the borough and sought assurance that young black males were not being disproportionately excluded in education. The Executive Director for Children and Families reported that recent data showed that exclusion levels were low in Barnet but noted that there had been increases post-Covid. Data showed less disproportionality in this area because there were higher

numbers of young white males were being excluded. The Committee were given assurance that exclusions were being managed in accordance with best practice and several programmes were in place to address this locally. **Action: Overview and Scrutiny Team to circulate school exclusions information reported to the Children and Education Overview and Scrutiny Sub-Committee on 7 March 2024.**

The Committee questioned how the Residents' Perception Survey had been conducted as the findings did not align with the experience of some Members within the community. The Assistant Director of Strategy and Communications reported that the sample size was 2,000 and it was representative of the borough population. It was reported that, in addition to the survey, further engagement work had taken place to get the in-depth views of specific groups.

Members commented that there was a lack of comparable data relating to previous years to assist in identifying trends over time. The Committee requested that future reports include trend and benchmarking data. It was also requested that data on specific minority groups was included as each had their own specific characteristics.

A Member referred to concerns from community groups regarding the allocation of Council grant funding and suggested that the arrangements may disadvantage minority groups. Officers undertook to review Area Committee and grant funding arrangements to explore this issue and whether any improvements were required. The Assistant Director of Strategy and Communications reported that Barnet provided funding for Barnet Together which was an umbrella body for the voluntary sector and this was considered to be a good arrangement for supporting many different kinds of organisations in the borough; she added that several community groups had received funding via the community events programme.

The Committee welcomed the number of events which had taken place over the last two years which celebrated the borough's diversity. It was questioned whether the programme would be continually reviewed to ensure that it was improved and expanded on. Officers reported that there had been learning from every event which would be used to enhance arrangements for future years. In addition, the Communications team would promote events locally.

A Member commented that the Council should share which groups had been supported by the various Council funding streams to raise awareness of the types of projects and events that could be eligible for funding.

RESOLVED that the Committee:

- 1. Note the progress of the development of the equalities strategic roadmap, Towards a Fair Barnet, as set out in the report.**
- 2. Agree that the Cabinet Member for Equalities and the Voluntary and Community Sector and officers be requested to consider the comments made by the Committee as detailed in the preamble above in relation to:**
 - Trend, benchmarking, and equalities data in respect of the Residents' Perception Survey;**
 - Distribution of Council grants and funding to a diverse range of community groups; and**
 - Review of the community events programme.**

10. TASK AND FINISH GROUPS UPDATE

The Committee considered a report which provided an update on progress made to date by the ongoing Task and Finish Groups established by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Sub-Committees.

RESOLVED that the Committee:

- 1. Note the updates as set out in the report.**

11. CABINET FORWARD PLAN (KEY DECISION SCHEDULE)

The Committee considered the report that set out the Cabinet Forward Plan (Key Decision Schedule) for 2023/24. The Committee noted that the Plan included items that could be included in the Committee's work programme for pre-decision scrutiny.

The Committee noted that a report was due to be reported to Cabinet on Fire Safety in Timber Framed Houses. It was requested that a report on the progress of the planned programme of works be reported to the Committee in one year's time.

RESOLVED that the Committee:

- 1. Note the Cabinet Forward Plan (Key Decision Schedule); and**
- 2. Request that an item on Fire Safety in Timber Framed Houses be added to the work programme for consideration around March / April 2025.**

12. SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

RESOLVED that the Committee:

- 1. Note the Overview and Scrutiny Committee Work Programme.**

The meeting finished at 8.42 pm