

Minutes

RESIDENTS' SERVICES SELECT COMMITTEE

24 September 2024



Meeting held at Committee Room 5 - Civic Centre

	<p>Committee Members Present: Councillors Wayne Bridges (Chair), Peter Smallwood (Vice-Chair), Darran Davies, Ekta Gohil, Scott Farley (Opposition Lead), Janet Gardner and Tony Burles</p> <p>Witnesses Present: Jas Nagra, Citizen's Advice Service Manager, Citizen's Advice Bureau Joanne Smith, Citizen's Advice Senior Adviser, Citizen's Advice Bureau Chief Inspector Ben Wright, Metropolitan Police Service</p> <p>Others Present: Dan Kennedy (Corporate Director of Central Services), Melissa Blower (Housing Project Manager), Daniel Ferrer (Licensing Team Manager), Liz Penny (Democratic Services Officer), Debby Weller (Housing Policy and Strategy Manager) and Richard Webb (Director of Community Safety & Enforcement)</p>
22.	<p>APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (<i>Agenda Item 1</i>)</p> <p>Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Kamal Kaur with Councillor Tony Burles substituting.</p>
23.	<p>DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST IN MATTERS COMING BEFORE THIS MEETING (<i>Agenda Item 2</i>)</p> <p>Councillor Tony Burles declared a non-pecuniary interest in agenda item 5 as he was on the Management Board of the Citizen's Advice Bureau in Hillingdon. Councillor Burles remained in the room but did not participate in the discussion on this item.</p>
24.	<p>TO RECEIVE THE MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING (<i>Agenda Item 3</i>)</p> <p>RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting dated 18 July 2024 be approved as an accurate record.</p>
25.	<p>TO CONFIRM THAT THE ITEMS OF BUSINESS MARKED AS PART I WILL BE CONSIDERED IN PUBLIC AND THOSE MARKED PART II WILL BE CONSIDERED IN PRIVATE (<i>Agenda Item 4</i>)</p> <p>It was confirmed that all items of business were in Part I and would be considered in public.</p>
26.	<p>REVIEW OF HOMELESSNESS AND THE CUSTOMER JOURNEY: WITNESS SESSION 5 (<i>Agenda Item 5</i>)</p> <p>Dan Kennedy, Corporate Director of Central Services and Melissa Blower, Housing Programme Manager, introduced the report on the Select Committee's ongoing Review of Homelessness and the Customer Journey. Colleagues from the Citizens Advice</p>

Bureau (CAB) were also in attendance to provide information about the services provided by CAB and to answer Members' questions in relation to this.

Jas Nagra, Citizen's Advice Service Manager at CAB informed Members that she had been with the service for 12 years. Joanna Smith, Citizen's Advice Senior Adviser at CAB was also in attendance and mentioned that she had been working as an Adviser for over 20 years and had recently completed a housing advance project funded by Nationwide.

Members heard that Housing Advice currently sat within core services at CAB but a funder was being sought to enable CAB to provide bespoke housing advice. Ms Smith highlighted the high demand for housing advice and the challenges faced due to limited resources. She praised the Council's housing officers for their knowledge and ability to manage expectations but also pointed out issues with communication and responsiveness. An example was cited of one particular client who had submitted a housing application. It was reported that the local authority had closed the application because the client had allegedly not responded to an email within the 24 hours allocated to submit additional evidence. It was claimed that the additional evidence had been provided within the deadline. Concerns were raised regarding a lack of cooperation to resolve issues that arose.

Ms Smith shared her experience of submitting complaints to the housing service through the standard local authority complaint procedures; none of which had been successful. She emphasised the need for better cooperation and responsiveness when things went wrong. It was alleged that, the higher CAB went within the LBH complaints process, the less expert and knowledgeable were the responses. The Committee was informed that, if complaints were unresolved at stages 1 and 2, the next step was to contact the Housing Ombudsman, but this was a lengthy process – processing times could reach up to 12 months.

The Corporate Director of Central Services acknowledged the feedback and mentioned the need for a stronger relationship with partners like the Citizens Advice Bureau. He proposed regular meetings to address issues more effectively and improve communication. He also committed to checking on the complaints mentioned by the representatives of CAB.

In response to questions from Councillors regarding the need for a CAB base in Hayes, officers from CAB confirmed that they were in support of this suggestion and would appreciate any assistance in securing a permanent office base at the One Stop Shop in Hayes.

Members enquired about the primary barriers faced by the Citizens Advice Bureau and how the Council could revise its policies to remove these obstacles. In response to this, the CAB officers outlined the importance of managing expectations as many members of the public were unaware of the reality of the housing crisis. It was recognised that this would take time.

Councillors highlighted the need for better communication and empathy from housing officers. It was confirmed that some housing officers and Councillors were more responsive than others. CAB officers highlighted concerns with the new homelessness application process suggesting that it was not fit for purpose and noting that, if an application were closed through no fault of the client, it could not be reopened or reinstated. Clients needed to submit a new application which was a lengthy and

complex process - this was particularly challenging for those clients who were not digitally capable. It was noted that the CAB then had to spend time helping these clients to submit a new form when they could be helping someone else.

Members noted that some clients tried to find ways around the housing system which could in the end be detrimental to their case, e.g. those who presented as homeless in order to get a different property or move band. Officers confirmed that CAB aimed to offer clients all the options open to them. It was acknowledged that the situation was sometimes complex, and the immigration status of some clients was particularly complicated.

The Select Committee suggested that it would be helpful if the Citizens Advice Bureau could be provided with the contact details of the chief whips to ensure Councillors responded appropriately to requests for information or assistance.

In response to further questions from Members, the CAB confirmed that better communication from housing services was crucial. Regular meetings with housing officers would also be beneficial.

With regard to the alleged unhelpful responses from some housing officers, further training was recommended, particularly for those at a higher level who were responsible for responding to complaints.

The need for better communication and cooperation between the Council and the Citizens Advice Bureau to improve the customer journey for those experiencing homelessness was emphasised. The Corporate Director of Central Services agreed to follow up on individual complaints identified by the CAB. He recognised the need for stronger relationships with partners and committed to regular meetings with the Citizens Advice Bureau and other partners to address issues more effectively and improve the working relationship. He also confirmed that he met with the housing team on a weekly basis to address any issues. It was noted that good customer care and good customer experience were extremely important.

RESOLVED: That the Residents' Services Select Committee noted the evidence heard at the witness session and sought clarification as necessary in the context of the review of Homelessness and the Customer Journey in Hillingdon.

27. **SAFER HILLINGDON PARTNERSHIP REPORT** (*Agenda Item 6*)

Richard Webb, Director of Community Safety and Enforcement provided a brief summary of the work of the Community Safety Partnership. He highlighted the following key points:

- The Making Hayes Safer Project aimed to reduce violence in Hayes and supported the Serious Violence Strategy.
- Completion of community safety strategic assessments and development of a new dashboard for monthly crime updates were planned.
- Plans were in place to develop an overarching Community Safety Strategy by the beginning of the next financial year.
- A Community Safety Survey would be launched in the near future to gather

residents' and businesses' input on partnership priorities. This information would feed into the Community Safety Strategy.

Chief Inspector Ben Wright of the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) presented the police report, covering strategic context and key issues. Key points highlighted included:

- The impact of recent disorder across the UK and the minimal manifestation in Hillingdon was highlighted. It was noted that there had been a knock-on effect for the MPS locally due to the supply of resources to the rest of the United Kingdom and the MPS at large. This had resulted in minimum resourcing in Hillingdon whilst those matters had been ongoing. Members heard that there had also been an after effect whereby people who had been on duty for extended periods of times on operations required rest and recovery periods.
- Challenges relating to prisoner releases and the recidivism rate were highlighted. Statistics for the United Kingdom were 25% recidivism rate i.e. 25% of offenders had been convicted of a crime within a year of being released from prison.
- There were issues with court backlogs which had an impact on victims of serious offences. These backlogs affected the MPS' ability to prosecute.
- The effect of international conflicts on local community relations was noted. Members heard that the response from community leaders and religious leaders in Hillingdon had been excellent in terms of supporting the Council and the police to work through these issues in a collaborative way; this had borne some fantastic results. The MPS had contributed a considerable number of resources to safeguard the communities affected.
- Immigration-related challenges were noted including crimes relating to the Colnbrook Immigration Centre which significantly impacted MPS resourcing.
- Recruitment challenges at a national and local level and the implementation of a new policing model were highlighted. It was noted that the Commissioner had implemented a New Met for London plan and aimed to drive significant change in the organisation. There had been some successes in terms of recruitment of PCSOs which meant more people out in the communities to improve the information flow. It was hoped that the situation in respect of the recruitment of PCs would continue to improve.
- In terms of local performance, Members were informed that figures for burglary were broadly unchanged year on year. There had been a reduction in theft from / of motor vehicles and homicide rates were down by 75% year on year (from 4 to 1).
- Schemes such as Right Care Right Person were highlighted – these ensured people were referred to the correct pathway for treatment thereby freeing up police time to deal with criminal matters and bolstering the public protection strand. It was confirmed that the public protection strand within West area impacting Hillingdon was fully staffed. These were the people who investigated matters such as rape, serious sexual offences and child abuse. Members heard that this strand was prioritised the most in terms of resourcing due to the high

level of harm associated with these offences.

- It was confirmed that the release of the Stop and Search Charter was awaited but significant work was being undertaken locally to ensure that stop and search was conducted in a professional manner. Vetting work was also underway to ensure the right people were recruited to the MPS. Moreover, the Committee was informed that there had been a significant increase in the number of people being removed from the organisation for incorrect behaviour. Misconduct cases were also being held on a monthly basis. In terms of diversity, it was noted that West Area had the highest degree of diversity of any of the London BCUs and generally had the highest level of recruitment from diverse communities.
- It was confirmed that Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) and efforts to enhance security on public transport remained a key focus of the MPS. There had been an increase in VAWG offences on buses hence the area of focus operationally was enhanced security on buses in partnership with TfL, schools and other mediums.
- Councillors were advised that figures for robberies were broadly the same as in previous years and a lot of preventative work was ongoing in this area.

Members noted the focus on neighbourhood policing and sought further clarification regarding the transition to a new messaging system.

In response Chief Inspector Ben Wright confirmed that the current messaging system was widely used in Hillingdon with around 7 million messages being sent each year. It was noted that approximately one third of homes were using OWL. Members were informed that the MPS was currently looking at an alternative system - decisions around funding were led by MOPAC. Maintaining communication with residents was key and plans were in place to manage the transition to the new system. It was agreed that it was important to have a new system up and running as soon as possible.

Members enquired how the MPS could prepare to resource centrally driven events such as the Notting Hill Carnival to minimise the impact on local policing in Hillingdon and keep residents safe. It was confirmed that such matters were managed by the resourcing department. It was acknowledged that this was a challenge as demand had increased exponentially. The MPS did everything possible to ensure officers were safeguarded and given an opportunity to recover when they returned from central aid. The MPS also ensured it sustained minimum staffing levels on response teams to enable them to respond to urgent calls.

Members expressed concerns about early offender releases and their impact on community safety. It was agreed that this was a challenge, but it was noted that the majority of those released did not reoffend. When people did reoffend, the police response was intelligence-led and data-driven. Local teams were aware of the crimes that were occurring in their areas and had detailed local knowledge. When people were released into their communities, crime patterns were monitored with that in mind.

Councillors enquired how e-bike theft was being addressed and noted that some e-bikes were being modified and could achieve considerable speeds. The Chief Inspector confirmed that some good work had been carried out locally in respect of this. All members of a particular gang responsible for a recent spate of e-bike crime in Hillingdon had been arrested. Members heard that i-phone theft was a concern locally

at present and a lot of work was being done in schools to raise awareness of this.

The Committee expressed confidence in the police's handling of high-level crimes but raised concerns about their response to low-level crimes such as theft, shoplifting, and anti-social behaviour. It was noted that these crimes had a significant impact on people's businesses and well-being.

Chief Inspector Ben Wright acknowledged these concerns and explained the police's approach to prioritising calls based on risk. He highlighted the reintroduction of neighbourhood officers to address grassroots issues and mentioned successful operations targeting repeat offenders and trouble spots for shoplifting. The support of the local community was invaluable in this. It was noted that, when possible, security teams at larger stores were able to intervene proactively by detaining shoplifters until the police could arrest them.

The Chief Inspector also discussed the challenges of resourcing and the broader societal issues contributing to crime such as alcoholism, drugs, housing issues and mental health challenges. Members heard that there were some very active ward panels in Hillingdon setting local priorities which ward officers targeted.

Members enquired about ways to improve communication and promote the good work done by the police. They suggested collaboration with Councillors, community groups, and residents' associations to share positive news stories.

Chief Inspector Ben Wright welcomed the suggestion and emphasised the importance of simplicity in communication platforms. He mentioned ongoing efforts to focus officers on tackling crime and the potential for a new platform to improve communication in the future.

Councillors raised concerns about the trust issue between residents and the police. The reluctance of some residents to report crimes was highlighted.

Chief Inspector Ben Wright acknowledged the importance of trust and detailed the police's efforts to engage with schools, faith groups, community leaders, and local tasking panels. He emphasised the need to balance engagement with addressing crime effectively.

Members raised the ongoing issue of Violence Against Women and Girls and the reluctance of victims to report crimes. The need for male police officers to engage with women's groups in order to build trust was highlighted.

The Chief Inspector shared the police's commitment to tackling VAWG and mentioned initiatives such as Operation Soteria to improve outcomes for victims. It was confirmed that Operation Soteria had been implemented in the MPS, which was very much based on research and focused on improving outcome rates for people who reported rape and serious sexual offences to police. It was reported that, since implementing this initiative, the MPS was seeing increases in detection rates and positive outcomes which were statistically significant and meaningful. The importance of focusing on offenders and providing support to victims through engagement and forensic resources was highlighted.

The Select Committee raised concerns about the barriers to reporting crime through the 101 service and online platforms. The need to ensure public meetings were

attended by individuals with the right intentions was also emphasised.

The Chief Inspector acknowledged the issues with the 101 service and online reporting and promised to feed back to the relevant teams. He noted the importance of public meetings and the need to address inappropriate behaviour of attendees. Members heard that people who were not displaying the right behaviours would be removed. Offences would be investigated, and Members were requested to provide further information and names of any specific individuals of concern to the Chief Inspector outside the meeting to enable him to explore this further. It was suggested that increased training regarding the effective running of ward panels would be beneficial.

Members enquired about the use of Stop and Search and the impact of not having a front desk at Uxbridge police station. Concerns regarding the strain on police resources due to the need to transport detainees to other locations such as Acton, Heathrow or Fulham were also raised.

In response, Members were reminded of the challenges of managing resources and the impact of funding on police operations. The difficulties posed by the lack of a front desk and the need to travel to other locations for detention were acknowledged.

RESOLVED: That the Residents' Services Select Committee noted the contents of the reports and asked questions in order to clarify matters of concern or interest in the Borough.

28. **STATEMENT OF GAMBLING POLICY CONSULTATION** (*Agenda Item 7*)

Daniel Ferrer, Licensing Team Manager, was in attendance to respond to Members' questions regarding the draft Statement of Gambling Policy as set out in the agenda pack.

Councillors sought further clarification regarding possible saturation in some areas noting the existence of six gambling establishments within a small area of Hayes. The Select Committee heard that all applications were considered on their individual merits – all the relevant data and the impact on the local area were taken into account. It was noted that the number of complaints received in relation to gambling establishments was low compared to those received regarding alcohol-related premises. It was difficult to refuse an application unless there was concrete evidence of substantial harm.

In response to Members' queries regarding funfairs and alleged flyposting without permission, it was confirmed that the Head of Service was undertaking a piece of work in relation to this.

Members noted the importance of safeguarding and sought further clarification as to how officers ensured that the Gambling Policy was being adhered to. In response to this, it was confirmed that risk-related inspections were carried out proactively by the enforcement team. Recent visits with the Gambling Commission had also been undertaken.

RESOLVED: That the Residents' Services Select Committee considered the revisions to the Statement of Gambling Policy and sought further clarification as necessary.

29. **HOUSING ALLOCATION POLICY CONSULTATION DRAFT** (*Agenda Item 8*)

Debby Weller, Head of Housing Strategy and Policy, was in attendance to respond to Members' requests for clarification regarding the Housing Allocation Policy Consultation Draft as set out in the agenda pack.

Members enquired whether the figures set out in the chart on page 122 of the agenda pack included migrants temporarily housed in hotels. It was confirmed that responsibility for asylum seekers placed in hotels by the Home Office did not sit with the local authority – the figures in the aforementioned table represented those households considered to be at risk of homelessness.

In relation to overcrowding, Members referenced the proposed changes to the current social housing allocations policy as set out on page 125 of the pack and expressed concern that the proposal would serve to further increase stress on housing stock. It was explained that larger properties were in high demand and short supply; the proposed changes would allow families to bid on smaller properties provided this did not result in statutory or severe overcrowding. The pressure on the three-bed queue was far greater than on the two-bed queue and it was anticipated that this change would help to reduce the pressure on larger properties.

In response to further queries, the Committee was advised that a housing offer would be considered 'reasonable' provided that it met the needs of the individual(s) concerned. In the case of domestic abuse victims who chose not to leave a property, Members heard that the local authority would carry out a risk assessment and do everything possible to make the property safe.

Councillors sought further clarification as to how residents' expectations were being managed. The Head of Housing Strategy and Policy confirmed that part of the rationale behind the proposed changes was to increase residents' understanding of the situation and the chances of being rehoused. It was anticipated that residents would be able to see more clearly which were the top priority bands. Information would be widely publicised to raise awareness of the current housing situation / waiting lists etc.

Members expressed concern that some residents housed outside the Borough incorrectly assumed that they would be able to move back into the Borough at a future date. Officers explained that those moved out of Borough into a temporary accommodation placement retained their residency with Hillingdon as Hillingdon Council had placed them there. However, those who moved into the private rented sector would be removed from Hillingdon's housing register. It was agreed that officers would follow this up to ensure residents fully understood the implications of accepting any offer.

The Select Committee noted that the Policy was a lengthy document and a difficult read and sought reassurance that it would lead to an improved experience for residents. It was confirmed that the revised Policy offered genuine change – the new banding system would provide increased clarity and would ensure people were moved more easily through the different types of accommodation.

In response to further questions from the Committee regarding the consultation process, Members heard that the response rate had been good with 241 responses to the online consultation having been received to date. Colleagues in Social Care and other organisations had also been consulted.

	<p>It was confirmed that, in the longer term, any agreed changes would be communicated carefully and clearly to residents via the website and other channels to ensure they were fully understood. A short video would also be produced to reset expectations regarding social housing. If residents were still unsure, they could seek further clarification via their case workers.</p> <p>Councillors sought reassurance that all those on the housing register list had been invited to respond to the consultation. It was confirmed that this had not yet happened as there had been a delay in sourcing the required email addresses. Members expressed concern regarding the short deadline and suggested that the consultation period be extended to ensure all those on the register were given the opportunity to respond. It was agreed that the Head of Housing Strategy and Policy would explore this further and would ensure that those on the register / joining the register were targeted as soon as possible.</p> <p>The Select Committee Members felt strongly that, as best practice going forward, it was essential that those impacted by any change be consulted first prior to consulting the general public.</p> <p>Councillors drew attention to the information regarding the consultation process as set out on pages 130-131 of the agenda pack noting that 241 responses was not a particularly large number. It was felt that there was a lack of detailed information regarding social media responses, and it was suggested that more could be done to ensure a better response rate. The Head of Housing Strategy and Policy agreed to conduct further analysis of this information and feed back to the Committee. Members expressed concern that those who were not digitally enabled would not be able to respond to the consultation. It was confirmed that a paper version had been made available. The Committee suggested that it would be a good idea to leave copies in the reception area at the Civic Centre to encourage people to respond.</p> <p>At the request of Members, it was agreed that a comprehensive update on the responses to the consultation would be communicated to the Committee via Democratic Services.</p> <p>RESOLVED: That the Residents' Services Select Committee reviewed and commented on the draft policy and consultation process.</p>
30.	<p>FORWARD PLAN (<i>Agenda Item 9</i>)</p> <p>RESOLVED: That the Forward Plan be noted.</p>
31.	<p>WORK PROGRAMME (<i>Agenda Item 10</i>)</p> <p>RESOLVED: That the Work Programme be noted.</p>
	<p>The meeting, which commenced at 7.00 pm, closed at 9.05 pm.</p>

These are the minutes of the above meeting. For more information on any of the resolutions please contact Liz Penny, Democratic Services Officer on epenny@hillingdon.gov.uk. Circulation of these minutes is to Councillors, officers, the press and members of the public.