

MINUTES OF OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Wednesday, 5 October 2022
(7:00 - 8:31 pm)

Present: Cllr Glenda Paddle (Chair), Cllr Dorothy Akwaboah (Deputy Chair), Cllr Andrew Achilleos, Cllr Donna Lumsden, Cllr Fatuma Nalule, Cllr Ingrid Robinson, Cllr Muazzam Sandhu, Cllr Phil Waker and Cllr Mukhtar Yusuf; Sajjad Ali and Richard Hopkins

Also Present: Cllr Saima Ashraf

Apologies: Cllr Paul Robinson, Glenda Spencer, Sarfraz Akram and Alex Powell

6. Declaration of Members' Interests

There were no declarations of interest.

7. Minutes (7 September 2022)

The minutes of the meeting held on 7 September 2022 were confirmed as correct.

8. Fees and Charges 2022

The Strategic Director, Finance and Investment (SDFI) presented a report so as to provide the Committee the opportunity to review and provide feedback on the Council fees and charges for 2022, in advance of the consideration of the 2023 fees and charges by the Cabinet in November. Comments and questions would be taken away by the SDFI and relayed to the relevant services for their responses and would be incorporated into the fees and charges report to Cabinet.

In response to Members' questions, the SDFI stated that all the points raised by Members would be considered as part of the fees and charges set for 2023, which would also include an explanation and rationale for why fees and charges had or had not changed. Specifically, he addressed the following:

- The staff parking charges had previously been changed due to Covid-19, with many staff having been asked to stay at home. As most officers were using the standard staff permits, rather than the senior Staff Permit Reds, it was these permits that had been changed.
- In terms of 'special treatment licences', these encompassed treatments such as reflexology, saunas, aromatherapy, body piercing and acupuncture.
- Where fee increases were negligible, the Council would look to freeze these.
- Whilst the Council did not have a choice as to statutory fee increases, and cost recovery fees that needed to be increased due to inflation, it would look to find a balance between freezes and increases.
- The suggestions around encouraging the usage of libraries and football pitches were particularly welcomed, as the Council was keen to promote the wider use of these spaces.

Members raised general concerns regarding increasing fees and charges during

the current cost-of-living crisis, particularly given the high rate of inflation that increases would typically be based on in line with the Council's policy. The Parent Governor (Primary) co-optee suggested that the fees and charges for Community Solutions services be frozen, especially those associated with services provided for children such as day nursery and early years services, due to the considerable impact they could have on parents. Other specific issues raised included:

- The disparity between some charges at the Barking Library compared to the Dagenham Library and the need to encourage greater use of the Borough's libraries;
- The charging policy for School visits to museums within the Borough;
- Leaseholder charges in respect of, for example, written responses to questions in relation to notices of assignment and subletting;
- A proposal to suspend the diesel surcharge on all car parking permits;
- The decision not to increase many of the charges relating to the Right-To-Buy scheme, Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMO), Selective Licences and gambling and casino licence fees;
- The income received and safety checks made relating to the storage of explosives;
- The feasibility of parking charges being based on vehicle emission categories in view of issues that had arisen when checking against DVLA records;
- The arrangements for Street Works Permits, the Flooding and Drainage Service, Low Risk Pest Control services, Bulky Waste and Graffiti and Jet Washing services;
- The possibility of reducing football pitch hire charges, should the individual clubs agree to clear the litter after their use of these, in line with a previous recommendation from the Committee; and
- The merits of increasing fees for some non-essential services as a means to subsidise some of the more essential services for residents.

9. Barking & Dagenham Traded Partnership: Repairs & Maintenance

The Acting Strategic Director, My Place (SDMP) delivered a report on repairs and maintenance undertaken by the Barking and Dagenham Traded Partnership. This included performance information generally, as well as across repairs, disrepairs and voids, the current concerns that the Council had and how it was working to improve the position of the service. A further update report would be presented to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in January 2023.

In response to questions from Members, the SDMP stated that:

- Everything raised by the Committee was already being considered by the Council and it was positive to hear that both officers and Members were on the same page as to this.
- It was important to outline the context behind the repairs backlog, which had been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic and staff members contracting Covid-19. The cost of labour, both through internal operatives and through the contractors themselves, had also increased, as well as the cost of materials. Many residents had chosen not to report repairs issues during the pandemic, as they were weary of operatives entering their homes; this had led to a large increase in repairs as the pandemic became less severe.
- The Council was very keen to listen to and learn from any comments; it was

reviewing data, looking at management information and emphasising the importance of collaboration with its contractors, towards which BDMS was open. It also knew that it had to review its repairs service as a whole and not just in terms of its contractors, looking into how it interacted with its customers and how it ensured higher customer satisfaction.

- Whilst there were issues in lots of areas, the Council would devise a plan to address these and work collaboratively to achieve this.
- In terms of the remedies that the Council had to ensure that work was undertaken if BDMS failed to carry out its work properly in accordance with its contract, there were specific occasions through which the Council could choose to put in interventions, such as currently, that allowed it to procure additional contractors as a “Plan B”. This would enable a mixed approach, so that the Council could deliver against the repairs to be undertaken. These conversations were ongoing, with BDMS in discussion with the Council as to how it could help through these interventions.
- The Acuserve system had been brought in at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, as a basic package. This system was currently being reconfigured to ensure that the Council was able to collect the robust data that was needed to best inform its plans going forward.
- The Council needed to arrive at a position where its repairs were being undertaken more proactively than reactively, and this would be a key focus in the future.
- Once the Council had collected all of the necessary data, this would be put into a 30-year asset management plan that would then provide a much clearer understanding of the Council’s stock and inform residents when their works would be undertaken.
- The Cabinet Member for Community Leadership and Engagement was dedicated to ensuring that the necessary improvement works were being undertaken. The Council also met on a weekly basis with colleagues from BDMS at all levels, to take them through these project plans. Whilst BDMS was using contractors and this was part of the immediate intervention needed, this was not seen as a lasting solution.
- Whilst the SDMP was unsure as to the number of surveyors that the service had, she felt that there could never be enough and this was an area that was being investigated to ensure that any strategic plan devised was realistic. Whilst this plan would not be perfect by the time it came back to the Committee in January 2023, it would be achievable and enable the Committee to monitor and track the improvements needed.
- In relation to the repairs backlogs and the analysis of these, there was lots of work currently being undertaken and the SDMP would share this with the Committee at its January 2023 meeting.
- Whilst the number of disrepairs claims had increased in Barking and Dagenham, this reflected the London-wide position. These claims were not necessarily from residents, but from companies that came into the boroughs and courted this work. Whilst this had been happening across London for some time, it was only just starting to affect the Borough; however, the Council was equipped to address this.
- The contractors that BDMS used were taken from a Framework, as was also the case if the Council needed to put in interventions. This Framework was independent of BDMS.
- The Council needed to review how repairs were delivered, to ensure that the Council was getting value for money and that residents were being provided

with an effective service. In the meantime, it needed to work with the current service, as dismantling this would also cost money, and the Council would need to make the appropriate calculations to ensure that this was the correct approach, if indeed it ever took this route. Nevertheless, it was felt that with the right intervention the service would be able to regain a good level of performance.

Members also asked questions and made suggestions in relation to the following:

- Whilst the pressures that the service faced were understood, especially considering the historic nature of properties in the Borough and the retrofitting that these required, it appeared that the service had a sufficient budget, but a lack of capacity to deliver, with Members enquiring as to whether there had been discussions around investing some of the service's budget into upskilling and recruitment, to drive delivery at pace. It was felt that more apprenticeships could also be created, to help with recruitment.
- It was suggested that there may be a need for BDMS to revise its current business plan and offer, as it appeared that the company was basing it on what was needed, rather than what it could realistically deliver. It was felt that this was leaving a significant gap in service delivery, which could let down residents.
- It was noted that BDMS had not achieved its 90% customer satisfaction target and therefore Members sought to understand what the Council was doing to increase this.
- The Committee also wished, if possible, to view an internal survey of the staff involved in the service, to better understand staff morale.
- Members, whilst acknowledging the honesty of the report, highlighted some of their own thoughts as to the weaknesses of the service, citing examples such as previous redundancies, the percentage of work currently undertaken by contractors, the removal of the bonus scheme for workers, the separate business for the repairs service and the inability for repairs to be undertaken over the weekends.
- It was felt that there needed to be more of an explanation as to why certain jobs took longer to complete than others; and whilst there might be a good reason for this, no analysis was available.
- There was a lack of understanding as to the figures behind the planned maintenance and capital works, which needed to be explained in more depth.
- Questions were raised as to whether the Council should consider using an alternative provider to complete works and whether it would be cost effective to do so.
- In 2019, the Committee had met with staff members who undertook repairs to void properties, from which Members had identified a number of issues and possible solutions, many of which appeared not to have been taken onboard. These should be revisited.
- In many cases timescales were often too short to enact and resolve for issues, such as the removal of asbestos.
- Members in their ward capacities often learnt of cases whereby residents telephoned the Council for two different repairs issues only to receive separate appointment dates. In those cases, one appointment should be given, undertaken by a multi-skilled member of staff.

Furthermore, casework contained many unresolved matters of repairs work. As

such, the Committee requested if it would be possible for more qualified surveyors to find the root cause of these issues, to enable matters to be resolved quicker, some of the problems of which were because of a lack of communication between the surveyors and the workers implementing the repairs jobs.

The discussions on the report highlighted a number of other enquiries meriting further officer responses. These included:

- Whether the Council or BDMS were liable financially from poor performance.
- The reasons as to why more due diligence had not been undertaken before the procurement of the Acuserve system in September 2020 to better understand the system, how to integrate it and its implementation period. Furthermore, the amount of time that the reconfiguration of the system would take and the potential costs of this.
- The actions that were being taken to resolve the number of disrepair claims.
- More information required on the voids figures.
- Whether BDMS had a preferred contract list in terms of suppliers, and if so, the criteria that was used to select these contractors; and
- The amount of capital and maintenance work that was planned to be undertaken by contractors, and the figures around this.

In conclusion, it was noted that despite previous requests officers had failed to provide information on legal disrepairs cases. Finally, Members asked that the Committee be provided with the figures for the delivery of the repairs service for the twelve months prior to the pandemic, to better understand whether the service was mainly working on backlog issues, or whether the issues were more embedded within the service.

Owing to the significant number of questions and enquiries on the report, Members put forward a suggestion that an informal pre-meeting of the Committee be held on a date to be agreed prior to the item returning in January 2023, to analyse the further officer responses which would be provided in advance, in order that Members be best prepared for the meeting.

10. Work Programme 2022/23

Following on from suggestions proposed by the Committee during the 'Draft Work Programme 2022/23' item at its last meeting on 7 September 2022 (minute 5 refers), items around net zero, an update on Reside and the Council's wholly owned council companies had been added to the work programme.

A Member suggested that the Committee look into the larger advertising screens that were being installed by Clear Channel, in various locations within the Borough, owing to the number of complaints received from residents as to these.

The Chair also stated that an additional Committee meeting would be scheduled for January 2023, to look into issues associated with the cost-of-living crisis and to revisit the Repairs and Maintenance issue in Minute 9 above.