

LONDON BOROUGH OF TOWER HAMLETS
MINUTES OF THE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
HELD AT 18:38 ON MONDAY, 29 JANUARY 2024
COUNCIL CHAMBER - TOWN HALL, WHITECHAPEL

Members Present in Person:

Councillor Musthak Ahmed	
Councillor Bodrul Choudhury	Scrutiny Lead for Children & Education
Councillor Ahmodur Khan	Scrutiny Lead for Adults and Health Services
Councillor Abdul Malik	Scrutiny Lead for Community Safety
Councillor Asma Islam	
Councillor Marc Francis	

Members In Attendance Virtually:

Councillor Abdul Mannan	Scrutiny Lead for Housing and Regeneration
Councillor Sabina Khan	
Councillor Maisha Begum	

Other Councillors Present in Person:

Councillor Saied Ahmed	(Cabinet Member for Resources and the Cost of Living)
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Co-optees Present in Person:

Jahid Ahmed
Halima Islam

Officers Present in Person:

Julie Lorraine	(Corporate Director for Resources)
Ellie Kershaw	(Director of Integrated Growth & Development)
Abdulzarack Kassim	(Finance Director Deputy Section 151 Officer)
Daniel Kerr	(Strategy and Policy Lead)
Thomas French	(Democratic Services Officer (Committees))

Officers In Attendance Virtually:

Afazul Hoque	(Head of Corporate Strategy & Communities)
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1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Councillors Sabina Khan, Maisha Begum and Abdul Mannan gave their apologies and joined online.

2. DECLARATIONS OF DISCLOSABLE PECUNIARY INTEREST AND OTHER INTERESTS

No declarations of disclosable pecuniary interest were received at the meeting. Cllr Bodrul Choudhury and Cllr Mannan declared that they are directors of Bromley-by-Bow Centre.

3. UNRESTRICTED MINUTES

The Chair **Moved** and it was:-

RESOLVED

That the unrestricted minutes of the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 11 December and 20 December 2024 be approved and signed by the Chair as a correct record of the proceedings.

4. SCRUTINY SPOTLIGHT

5. COST OF LIVING

Cllr Saied Ahmed, Cabinet Member for Resources and the Cost of Living, gave a presentation on the impact of cost of living in the borough and provision in place to support residents, with Julie Lorraine, Corporate Director for Resources, Ellie Kershaw, Director of Integrated Growth & Development, Abdulzarack Kassim, Finance Director Deputy Section 151 Officer.

The committee made the following comments and questions:

- How accessible is the resident support scheme? What barriers are you finding for residents to access it? Officers confirmed that there are online and offline ways for residents to get help with the applications and there have been an increase in applications, which shows that the scheme is reaching residents, but the council is always looking for ways to further promote the scheme. Cllr Saied Ahmed highlighted how the idea stores are on hand to help residents who need support with the scheme.
- Private rent is soaring across the borough, what is the council doing to support residents who rent privately? Officers stated the level of support that is currently being offered, including grants and loans that can help residents when they need help with a private rental.
- Residents who have no recourse to public funds, including children, what has the council done to find and support these residents who will be in a vulnerable place? Officers confirmed that the adult support team can provide further detail on the support for those who have no recourse to public funds.
- The report does not mention care leavers, what is the current support being provided? Officers highlighted the range of support that is being provided to care leavers, including how the employment service provides support for job interviews.

- Why is the Bangladeshi Community in Tower Hamlets more likely to be facing financial pressures after the Covid-19 Pandemic and through the current cost of living crisis? Cllr Saied Ahmed reflected on why the Bangladeshi Community are facing issues in this area, stating that many within the community were affected when hospitality-based business were affected by the pandemic, with many households seeing single earners unable to earn income.
- How will the proposed raise in council tax help those who are struggling with the cost of living crisis? Cllr Saied Ahmed stated that the raise will not affect those who are struggling most within the borough.
- Will there be any more rounds of house hold support fund going out to residents? Officers confirmed that the council is waiting for the government to confirm if the funding will continue in 2024/25.
- Members requested an officer response in writing on if a legal opinion was sought over if the Mayor's name was allowed to be added to the letterhead on the letters sent out about the house hold support fund.
- What support is the council providing to vulnerable residents on prepayment meters? Officers confirmed that current schemes in place do provide payments for those on prepayment meters, and the idea stores have recently launched specialised support for those on prepayment meters. Cash alternatives are also available.

East End Citizen Advice Bureau gave a presentation highlighting the struggles residents are facing in the cost of living crisis, the increase in advice East End Citizen Advice Bureau is offering and how important it is to raise funding for vital work of the organisation and partners.

The committee made the following comments and questions:

- Do you recognise any gaps in the council budget that would help organisations like yours? Residents stated that more resource can be put into collaboration, like having forums with council departments and stakeholders, or providing support on accessing funding.
- What do you think the council can do to provide support to residents through the Citizen Advice Bureau? Residents stated that allowing collaboration to happen with contacts within the council would be helpful, for example, when residents come for support with council tax, being able to speak to a council officer directly would make a difference to the resident.

First Love Foundation gave a presentation highlighting how important it is to build a better working relationship between organisations like First Love Foundation and the council, working with residents to build on support past food vouchers and how support organisations are at capacity within the borough.

The committee made the following comments and questions:

- Do you think there is enough funding from the council to organisations like yours? What can the council do to ensure funding remains

available to the First Love Foundation as you develop your specialised work? Residents reflected that while the First Love Foundation has adapted to move away from the food bank model to more specialised advice means funding is different and having full time staff to provide advice presents increased funding challenges.

- Organisations like yours are providing important wrap around care to ensure that residents are being well supported with specialised legal advice. Residents stated that residents are coming with complex needs and it takes resources to ensure they are getting specialist support.

Wapping Bangladesh Association gave a presentation highlighting how the cost of living crisis is affecting the Bangladeshi community in Tower Hamlets, working with other communities who are also struggling and the increased usage of advice centres.

The committee made the following comments and questions:

- Who are your centres open to? Mostly BME communities use the centre for support, but all the borough is welcome to come for advice. The association has been operating since the 1980s and is in a unique position to provide a range of advice to all that need it.
- If your organisations are providing 5 days a week of advice, how are you finding funding for your work? Residents confirmed that a mixture of empowering volunteers and maximising paid work to support the community, taking every opportunity to provide advice whenever someone approached the association.

Bow Food Bank gave a presentation highlighting how the role of the food bank has changed in Tower Hamlets, partnership working with other organisations for service users and the impact of food poverty.

The committee made the following comments and questions:

- Do you have any examples of when the council provided networking, communication, or engagement to help organisations like yourself out in the community? Residents highlighted how helpful the council poverty team has been to link up with residents who need help, but the council could be doing more in this area.
- What can the council do to support Bow Food Bank, so when residents come to you for help, they are checked to see if they are getting the most out of their benefits and signposted to other services the council runs? Residents agreed that residents come to foodbanks as they do not know where else to turn, so it's a good opportunity to ensure they are signed up for the best support they can get, but this comes with costly training and resources for staff and volunteers.

The chair thanked all the presenters for attending the committee and giving important presentations about the cost of living from their organisation's perspectives.

Members reflected on the cost of living feedback and evidence and asked for this to be presented to the Mayor as part of the scrutiny budget feedback.

RESOLVED

The committee noted the presentation

6. PRE-DECISION SCRUTINY OF UNRESTRICTED CABINET PAPERS

7. VERBAL UPDATES FROM SCRUTINY LEADS

RESOLVED:

Members noted the Update.

8. FORTHCOMING DECISIONS

RESOLVED:

Members noted the forward plan.

9. OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE QUERY AND ACTION LOG

RESOLVED:

Members noted the officer updates on committee action.

10. UNRESTRICTED REPORTS 'CALLED IN'

Nil items.

11. UNRESTRICTED REPORTS FOR CONSIDERATION

Nil items.

12. REQUESTS TO SUBMIT PETITIONS

Nil items.

13. ANY OTHER UNRESTRICTED BUSINESS WHICH THE CHAIR CONSIDERS TO BE URGENT

14. EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

As the agenda circulated had no exempt/confidential reports and there was therefore no requirement to exclude the press and public to allow for its consideration.

15. EXEMPT/ CONFIDENTIAL MINUTES

Nil items.

16. EXEMPT/ CONFIDENTIAL REPORTS 'CALLED IN'

Nil items.

17. PRE-DECISION SCRUTINY OF EXEMPT/ CONFIDENTIAL) CABINET PAPERS

Nil items.

18. ANY OTHER EXEMPT/ CONFIDENTIAL BUSINESS THAT THE CHAIR CONSIDERS URGENT

Nil items.

The meeting ended at 20:50

Chair, Councillor Musthak Ahmed
Overview & Scrutiny Committee