

LONDON BOROUGH OF TOWER HAMLETS

**MINUTES OF THE GENERAL PURPOSES COMMITTEE
HELD AT 7.00 P.M. ON THURSDAY, 24 SEPTEMBER 2015
MP701, 7TH FLOOR, MULBERRY PLACE, 5, CLOVE CRESCENT, LONDON E14
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Members Present:

Councillor Sabina Akhtar (Chair)
Councillor David Edgar (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Craig Aston
Councillor Aminur Khan
Councillor Danny Hassell (Attending as substitute for Councillor Khales Ahmed)

Apologies:

Councillor Abjol Miah
Councillor Khales Uddin Ahmed
Councillor Abdul Asad

Officers Present:

Melanie Clay	– Director, Law, Probity and Governance, Monitoring Officer
John Williams	– Returning Officer, Service head, Democratic Services
Debbie Jones	– Interim Director, Children's Services
Hania Franek	– (Head of School Governance & Information, Education Social Care & Wellbeing)
Elizabeth Dowuona	– Committee Officer (Democratic Services)

WELCOME

The Chair extended a warm welcome to all in attendance. She introduced Melanie Clay, the newly appointed Director of Law, Probity and Governance who was in attendance to the Standards Advisory Committee for the first time.

Melanie Clay spoke briefly about her career and the expertise she hoped to bring to the Council as a whole. The Committee noted and welcomed Ms Clay's extensive professional experience in local government and her additional role as the Council's Monitoring Officer.

APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Abjol Miah and Councillor Khales Uddin Ahmed.

1. DECLARATIONS OF DISCLOSABLE PECUNIARY INTERESTS

There were no declarations of interests.

2. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 1 July 2015 were agreed as a correct record of the proceedings.

3. REPORTS FOR CONSIDERATION

3.1 Elections 2014/2015 Legacy

John Williams, Head of Service, Democratic Service, introduced the report and updated the Committee on the 7th May 2015 – UK Parliamentary General Election, constituencies of Bethnal Green & Bow and Poplar & Limehouse. and the 11th June 2015 – Tower Hamlets Mayoral by-election and Stepney Green Ward by-election.

The Service Head, Democratic Services tabled an updated Appendix 1 and highlighted the following:

- The preparatory work and planning for the delivery of the 7th May elections drew on a range of experience and lessons learnt at previous elections in Tower Hamlets, including the London Mayor and Assembly elections plus two Council ward by-elections in April and May 2012, which were the subject of a report by the Electoral Commission in relation to a number of allegations of electoral fraud; and the combined European Parliamentary, Tower Hamlets Mayor and Council elections on 22nd May 2014, which were also subject to some allegations, following which the Mayoral election was avoided by the Election Court on 23rd April 2015. A range of initiatives were developed to ensure a free and fair contest, efficient delivery of the elections and an orderly poll and count in each case.
- In turn the planning work for the 11th June 2015 elections drew on further lessons learnt in the process of delivering the 7th May polls.
- The result of the two elections was a more successful election which attracted positive feedback from a number of sources and was not been subject to any challenge.
- It was proposed that a new Chief Executive due to take up post with the Council in October 2015, would take up the role of Returning Officer and Electoral Registration Officer for Tower Hamlets.

A review of the delivery of the May and June 2015 elections was being undertaken to identify the lessons learnt, improvements identified etc, in order to provide a legacy for future elections in Tower Hamlets. It was considered that the review was likely also to provide useful recommendations for Returning Officers, Police forces and partner agencies elsewhere in the UK.

The Committee noted that The Rt Hon Eric Pickles MP, in his capacity as UK Government Ant-Corruption Champion, was currently leading an Electoral Fraud Review and had issued a call for evidence in connection with that review with a deadline of 8th October 2015. The Returning Officer's expectation was that the legacy report on the Tower Hamlets elections would be able to make a useful contribution to that review.

The Committee noted that the Legacy report included contributions from partner agencies that were involved in delivering or overseeing the 2015 elections locally. These including the Metropolitan Police (both Tower Hamlets Police and the Special Enquiry Team at Scotland Yard), the Electoral Commission, the DCLG Commissioners and Election Agents of candidates at the 2015 elections. The contributions included their views on how the elections were conducted – i.e. what went well, what could have been improved and what suggestions would they make for future elections.

The Service Head, Democratic Services provided an outline of the draft legacy report which was currently in preparation with a view to being completed by the end of September 2015. It was anticipated that this would enable any relevant matters to be submitted as evidence to the Electoral Fraud Review by 8th October 2015.

A working draft of the report was tabled at the meeting to enable Members of the General Purposes Committee to have an oversight of the main areas covered in the legacy report. The areas were noted as follows:-

- Context and background
- Description of the elections in Tower Hamlets 2014 and 2015, together with the issues raised in the Election Court judgement in April 2015
- An assessment of the actions taken in respect of each element of the elections, i.e.:-
 - Joint working
 - Registration
 - Integrity measures
 - Postal Votes
 - Polling Stations
 - Verification and count.
- Outcomes, issues for consideration, continuing challenges

It was noted that Conclusions and Recommendations, would be presented in three categories as set out below:-

(i) Tower Hamlets-specific issues

Those of the anti-fraud and other measures utilised at the elections in May 2015 that were introduced in response to specific issues that had arisen at previous elections in Tower Hamlets and conditions locally. Which of these worked particularly well; any that were unsuccessful or left room for further improvement; and any that would require revision in order to be repeated in future years because of resource restrictions or any other reason?

(ii) Lessons and recommendations for general application

Those initiatives or actions taken locally that were successful and would be of interest more generally to agencies and authorities in other areas of the country. Also elements of electoral delivery that were problematic despite the measures taken and any recommendations that Tower Hamlets can make for improved guidance nationally on best practice.

(iii) The legal framework involving any areas in which the current legislative framework could have impeded the efforts to ensure an efficient and free and fair election; and any recommendations to propose to government for possible changes to the law, for example:-

- Was the current range of election offences, corrupt and illegal practices still useful and appropriate in the context of a modern election?
- Were the powers of the Returning Officer or the Police sufficient to address the threat of electoral fraud or malpractice, prevent false registration or personation?
- Did the statutory election timetable adequately allow for complaints to be investigated prior to the poll or in good time afterwards; and any fraud to be remedied in a timely fashion after the result of the election was declared?
- What factors worked against the swift investigation and prosecution of offenders?
- Was the current method of challenging an election result (the Election Petition) still the most suitable process?

There was a lengthy discussion where Members asked a number of questions and made various comments on the reports before them. The following points were noted:

- With regards to concerns about the high number of postal votes rejected, particularly in the May Local and Mayoral elections, it was noted that the main reason which led to most postal votes being rejected was due to signatures on electoral registration forms not matching those on ballot forms. Although it was acknowledged that signatures may have changed or altered over a period of time, it was a key feature of the system of identification in postal voting which was highlighted to all those registering for postal voting, that there was a need to provide their normal signature, which should match what was provided on the voters registration form. The opportunity to refresh one's signature would be provided at the next registration exercise.

- Members found the choice of venue for the election Count at the last election an excellent one as it gave the opportunity for transparency, stringent monitoring and for adequate count and security staff to be deployed.
- Members found security at the election count excellent, in particular, the verification of individuals entering the premises.
- With respect to Members' concerns of multiple voting using different addresses, John Williams underlined that it was a criminal offence to vote more than once although an individual may be registered at different addresses for example in different boroughs. Members cited examples of some landlords registering for postal voting (which was an offence). John Williams undertook to highlight this as an area which required scrutiny.
- On the question of the reliability of the administration of the count on postal votes to ensure accuracy and an adherence to the regulations, it was noted that the key was adopting a systematic approach, starting with verification of signatures, a time consuming exercise.
- On the question of whether an electronic count might be worth considering in future to aid speed and accuracy, John Mills in response stated that that was an option the next Returning Officer could consider after a risk assessment.
- On the question of whether there was a better system of challenging an election result to ensure a speedier process, John Williams stated that an election result challenge was an extremely lengthy process given the legal hurdles required to be surmounted by petitioners.

Following discussion it was

RESOLVED –

That the report be noted.

3.2 Report on Radicalisation and Extremism in Schools

ITEM WITHDRAWN.

Debbie Jones, Interim Corporate Director, Children's Services, was in attendance to explain the reasons for the withdrawal of the item to the Committee.

She apologised to the Committee for requesting the withdrawal of the item at short notice and undertook to submit a comprehensive report, in view of the national interest on the issue over the past few months and the range of service areas and partners who would need to provide an input in the report.

4. ANY OTHER BUSINESS WHICH THE CHAIR CONSIDERS URGENT

There were no such items.

5. EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

RESOLVED –

That in accordance with the provisions of Section 100A of the Local Government Act 1972, as amended by the Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985, the press and public be excluded from the remainder of the meeting on the grounds that the remaining agenda item contained information defined as exempt or confidential in Part 1 of Schedule 12A to the Local Government Act 1972.

6. RESTRICTED MINUTES

The restricted minutes of the General Purposes Committee held on 1 July 2015 were presented for approval.

RESOLVED –

That the restricted minutes of the meeting of the General Purposes Committee held on 1 July 2015 be agreed and signed by the Chair, as a correct record of the proceedings.

7. LOCAL AUTHORITY GOVERNOR APPOINTMENTS

The report was introduced by Hania Franek, Head of School Governance & Information, who advised that none of the applications before the Committee were contentious.

It was noted that Members had no objections to the applications for reappointment submitted.

RESOLVED -

(1) That the applicants for re-appointment to Local Authority School Governor positions as set out in the report be noted.

(2) That the applications for Local Authority Governors as detailed in the report be approved as follows:

- That Jonathan Farrell be nominated for re-appointment as a governor at Alice Model Nursery School under the 2012 School Governance (Constitution) Regulations.

- That Azizur Rahman be nominated for re-appointment as a governor at Blue Gate Fields Junior School under the 2012 School Governance (Constitution) Regulations.
- That Joy Everest be nominated for re-appointment as a governor at Marion Richardson School under the 2012 School Governance (Constitution) Regulations.
- That Dennis Jenner be nominated for re-appointment as a governor at Bowden House School under the 2012 School Governance (Constitution) Regulations.
- That Dr Sarabajaya Kumar be nominated for re-appointment as a governor at Mulberry School under the 2012 School Governance (Constitution) Regulations.
- That Salma Mahbub be nominated for re-appointment as a governor at Bygrove School under the 2012 School Governance (Constitution) Regulations.

(3) That the nominations for the appointment to Local Authority School Governor positions as set out in the report be noted.

- That Ian Jones be nominated for appointment as a governor at St Paul's Way Trust School.
- That Percy Aggett be nominated for appointment as a governor at the Pupil Referral Unit

9. ANY OTHER EXEMPT/CONFIDENTIAL BUSINESS WHICH THE CHAIR CONSIDERS URGENT

There were no such items.

The meeting ended at 8.15 p.m.

Chair, Councillor Sabina Akhtar
General Purposes Committee