

LONDON BOROUGH OF TOWER HAMLETS

MINUTES OF THE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

HELD AT 6.30 P.M. ON MONDAY, 23 NOVEMBER 2020

ONLINE 'VIRTUAL' MEETING - [HTTPS://TOWERHAMLETS.PUBLIC-I.TV/CORE/PORTAL/HOME](https://towerhamlets.public-i.tv/core/portal/home)

Members Present:

Councillor James King (Chair)	
Councillor Bex White (Vice Chair)	– Scrutiny Lead for Children and Education
Councillor Faroque Ahmed	– Scrutiny Lead for Community Safety & Environment
Councillor Marc Francis	
Councillor Ehtasham Haque	– Scrutiny Lead for Housing and Regeneration
Councillor Denise Jones	–
Councillor Gabriela Salva Macallan	– Scrutiny Lead for Health and Adults
Councillor Leema Qureshi	– Scrutiny Lead for Resources and Finance

Co-opted Members Present:

Halima Islam	– Co-Optee
James Wilson	– Co-Optee

Others Present:

Mayor John Biggs

Officers Present:

Somen Banerjee	– (Director of Public Health)
Adam Boey	– (Senior Strategy & Policy Manager - Corporate)
Andreas Christophorou	– (Divisional Director, Communications)
Thorsten Dreyer	– (Head of Intelligence & Performance)
Sharon Godman	– (Divisional Director, Strategy, Policy and Performance)
Claire Harding	– Research Director (Centre for London)
Daniel Kerr	– (Strategy and Policy Manager)
Will Tuckley	– (Chief Executive)
David Knight	– (Democratic Services Officer, Committees, Governance)

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for lateness were received from Councillor Denise Jones.

2. DECLARATIONS OF DISCLOSABLE PECUNIARY INTEREST AND OTHER INTERESTS

The following Councillors declared a potential interest in relation to the Item 8 Pre-Decision Scrutiny Questions:

- Councillor Marc Francis due to his wife Councillor Rachel Blake being the Deputy Mayor and Cabinet Member for Adults, Health and Wellbeing; and
- Councillor Ehtasham Haque due to wife Councillor Sabina Akhtar being the Cabinet Member for Culture, Arts and Brexit.

3. UNRESTRICTED MINUTES

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

RESOLVED

That the unrestricted minutes of the meeting of the last meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 26th October 2020 be approved as a correct record of the proceedings and the Chair was authorised to sign them accordingly.

4. REQUESTS TO SUBMIT PETITIONS

Nil items

5. FORTHCOMING DECISIONS

Noted

6. UNRESTRICTED REPORTS 'CALLED IN' - PROPOSED CHANGES TO THE COMMON HOUSING REGISTER ALLOCATIONS SCHEME

The Committee noted that a decision from the Mayor on the proposed changes to the Common Housing Register Allocations Scheme was awaited.

7. UNRESTRICTED REPORTS FOR CONSIDERATION

7.1 Strategic Performance Reporting

The Committee received a presentation on the delivery and performance information for Quarter 2 (July – September 2020) by Mayor John Biggs; Will Tuckley, Chief Executive and Thorsten Dreyer, Head of Intelligence and

Performance. The main points of the discussion on this report may be summarised as follows:

The Committee noted that:

- The Council was exceeding performance in many areas, but areas of under-performance was recognised.
- This period has been impacted by the pandemic. Notably, the Council's ability to conduct the Annual Residents Survey, and collect qualitative information on residents' views.
- The Service and officers are seeking to accurately capture that information based on comparable survey techniques with other local authorities in London.
- LBTH are working with their supplier to develop different options including how any face to face consultation would be undertaken in a COVID-19 secure way or with whatever restrictions are in position at the time (e.g. a doorstep interview with 15-minute maximum at a safe distance or telephone survey as an alternative). Accordingly, LBTH are working on different models for delivery with the contractor to make sure that a survey can be undertaken during January 2021 to February 2021.
- As consequence of the pandemic there has been the development of better methods of remote monitoring of public opinion (e.g. telephone survey methods have undergone a serious methodological development regarding the coverage of households with increased access to telephones justifying its use and provided you get representative samples). However, it is recognised that it can produce slightly differing results from face to face surveys and it is important to take this into account when the data is being interpreted.
- One of the good things about the approach that has been adopted in Tower Hamlets is that the Council now has a good set of core questions and techniques developed over many years now.
- Regarding Households prevented from becoming homeless the Outturn for Q2 2020/21 shows an increase by 20.99%.
- LBTH have recruited Tenancy Sustainment Officers to work with social and private landlords, and directly with clients to address homelessness.
- This is related to the new target that flows from the Homelessness Reduction Act, that places new more challenging duties on housing authorities to intervene earlier to prevent homelessness and to take reasonable steps to relieve homelessness for all eligible applicants, not just those that have priority need under the Act.
- The nature of the housing market in East London makes it challenging to provide sustainable tenancies for people in the private sector and the Mayor indicated that he would very much welcome a more detailed scrutiny on how LBTH as a housing authority can address this effectively.
- Although LBTH performance regarding preventing homelessness has improved the increased volume of work that the Homelessness

Reduction Act has brought to the Housing Options Team and the impact of the pandemic has had a significant influence on performance.

- Noted that LBTH as a housing agency needs to take a fundamental look at the way which the Housing Option Services is working and to identify where enhance its performance.
- Noted that Housing and Regeneration Scrutiny Committees have started to look at the Housing Options Service with a focus on (i) the customer journey (in light of Covid-19); (ii) the implementation of the changes to the Allocations Scheme; and (iii) the introduction of an Intermediate Housing Register of Interest.
- Noted that the report had not addressed the reasons for poor performance (**e.g.** WorkPath and Youth Justice) and the Committee indicated its frustration not to be provided with this information.
- Noted that the format for presenting this information had change significantly and having considered how other organisations present their performance data have worked to get the balance right with more deep dives into particular areas and to provide an overview of where the Council was in a global sense on particular areas and fewer tables and charts. However, it was recognised that more detail could be provided regarding those issues where councillors would like an explanation.
- In terms of WorkPath the explanation is as the scheme is intended to work with are those who are furthest from the labour market and now as there are significantly more people are out of work than previously this has had a considerable impact (**e.g.** Those who have lost a job more recently are more able to get a job more readily which has impacted on those were who are further away already from the labour market at a previous point in time.
- A more detailed narrative would be obtained from the Youth Justice Service regarding the reasons for their performance figures. Also, that a Pre-Decision Scrutiny Question was to be submitted to the Mayor in Cabinet on the 25th November 2020 asking, “What are the drivers for a slightly increasing amount of young people entering youth justice system?”
- The Youth Justice Service performance has been subject to intense scrutiny by the Youth Justice Board looking at what interventions are currently in place and the Board is satisfied that further improvements are now being made. It was therefore recommended that a briefing note be prepared on the steps that are being taken to address this critical area.
- With regards to the level of public realm cleanliness (litter) performance it had dipped below target in Q2 apparently due to the level of litter having increased as lockdown measures had been eased. However, it was felt that this does not provide a justification as to why the Council has fallen short against a standard target that was set before or at least during the early stages of the pandemic?
- Regarding the level of household recycling (quarterly audited) concern was expressed that was target of 22.0% was not challenging enough if the Council were to make Tower Hamlets a cleaner greener Borough. It

was felt that LBTH needed to have more stretching targets set for recycling in 2021 and 2022.

- Whilst reasonable progress has been made during the first six months of the new contract it had proved very difficult to get the Council's recycling levels up higher in Tower Hamlets partly because the Borough is a heavily flatted authority with few back gardens and there are issue's with the contamination of recycling.
- The Borough's estates are a key target in terms of improving methods for generating and clearly removing recycling and in partnership with Tower Hamlets Homes the Council is working on a pilot to improve recycling in more dense areas of social housing and high-rise developments. With the intention of rolling this out across the Borough with other social landlords and that experience should help to re-evaluate the target for the next year.

In conclusion, the Chair thanked Mayor John Biggs; Will Tuckley, Chief Executive and Thorsten Dreyer, Head of Intelligence & Performance. for their presentation

The Chair then **Moved**, and it was:

RESOLVED that it wanted more details on:

1. Number of adults supported into employment by the WorkPath partnership.
2. Young people entering the youth justice system for the first time; and
3. Level of household recycling (quarterly audited).

7.2 Covid 19 Update

The Committee received an update from COVID-19 by Somen Banerjee – Director of Public Health regarding:

1. COVID-19 infection: weekly incidence, variation across Tower Hamlets.
2. Local Outbreak Control Plan Priorities.
3. Mass testing (Targeted Asymptomatic Testing).
4. Vaccination.
5. Post lockdown; and
6. Regional Tiering.

The main points of discussion on the presentation are outlined as follows:

The Committee noted that:

- There was under assessment before the introduction of local testing sites.
- In the Borough there is monitoring of data by ethnicity/deprivation and although there have been quite significant disparities these have now narrowed and the testing uptake in different groups has improved.

- One of the key concerns from the data being received from the test and trace programme was that 20% of the people contacted are not self-isolating which is a real concern.
- One of the purposes of the Test and Trace model is not just about identifying contacts but working with people to support them to self-isolate and linking them into support services.
- The data seems to show that in some of the least deprived areas of the Borough there seems to be a lower incidence of Covid-19. Therefore, it is important to understand why the rates are so low and is it necessary to increase uptake of testing.
- Importance of addressing anti-vaccine content online and that the Councils Communications and Marketing Team monitor online content to counter with facts the baseless conspiracy theories about a coronavirus vaccine that have been spreading on social media.
- It will be a significant challenge to develop the trust of the population by the circulation of the correct information through the right channels if there is to be a widespread uptake of the vaccine.
- With regard to the types of workplaces that have been negatively affected as a result of the pandemic these tend not to be the large workplaces, but the small businesses might be a part of the business sector that would benefit from the introduction of mass testing.
- It was difficult to predict which of the new Tiers Tower Hamlets would fall into but if the Borough moved into Tier Two which would mean for example that you must not socialise in a group of more than 6 people outside, including in a garden or a public space – (i.e. the 'rule of 6') pubs and bars must close, unless operating as restaurants. Hospitality venues can only serve alcohol with substantial meals. The Council would need to be strong on local compliance and Local Enforcement because there is a risk that cases will start to go up again as it did last time with the easing of the lock down last time.

In conclusion, the Chair:

1. Thanked Somen Banerjee – Director of Public Health for his presentation and for the level of pertinent detail that he had provided; and
2. Informed the Committee that he had received the Mayor's response to the Committee's COVID Review, and that the Committee would review these responses in greater depth and look forward to action and moving forward with the Committee's recommendations.

7.3 Improving Resident Engagement

The Committee received a detailed presentation on how the Council is Improving Resident Engagement by Mayor John Biggs; Sharon Godman, Divisional Director for Strategy Policy and Performance; Andreas Christophorou, Divisional Director, Communications and Marketing and Emily Fieran-Reed, Senior Strategy and Policy

Manager. In addition, the Chair informed the meeting that Claire Harding from the Centre for London was in attendance – to share an external perspective on community engagement. An outline of the discussion is set out below:

The Committee noted that:

- Communications and Marketing Team have a Bengali Press Officer who is tasked with making pitches to the Bengali media including Channel S (which has an audience of 500,000 British Bangladeshis) all the time and produces a media report every week to the Bengali media. The Team also (i) produces a Bengali Newsletter; (ii) works closely with Mosques across London including work specially on Covid-19 with the East London Mosque); (iii) works with Housing Association's; (iv) advertises in community languages; and (v) provides translated material in community languages.
- 62% of people in the last residents survey indicated that they felt involved although this could be improved upon and there is the potential to get a lot better. This works on a number of levels as whilst a good consultation hub is important LBTH also needs to have an accessible website and introduction of the Public Sector Bodies Accessibility Regulations 2018 is intended to ensure that public sector websites and mobile applications are accessible to all users which are all local authorities and public sector organisations have to abide by. Whilst LBTH is working to improve accessibility all the time the pandemic has prevented the face-to-face element both through the Council and partner agencies. For example, LBTH held a Community Day last year with 300 people in attendance and it is the mixture of (i) digital; (ii) face to face; (iii) partnership work; and (iv) targeted work that can give access to a wider audience.
- With regard to the “Seldom-Heard” or the under-represented it is the responsibility of agencies to reach out to such excluded people, ensuring that they have access to services and that they are heard by service professionals and decision-makers. Accordingly, it is important to find out how to reach them and often it will be (i) partner organisation; (ii) the resident route; (iii) or that they already part of a certain community that is the best way to get the content out. The Council recognises that there are others with closer links to “Seldom-Heard” communities.
- Consultations can be too narrow and directive and excluding participation from a wider audience to share views and ideas e.g. a technical issue with the SEND/SLS consultation which made it difficult for residents who are not parents/carers to respond. **[NB: Subsequent to the meeting this has now been rectified and the Service confirms that this is an open consultation to which anyone can respond.]**
- Even in the Bengali community the Communications and Marketing Team found that adult children have been able to feed information back to their parents and into discussions in their communities. Therefore, whilst the Council would want to somehow get into those conversations it does not need to be LBTH doing that first. In addition, it is important

to work with different community groups and to listen and try and find out how people want to be involved; if they want to be reached; and if they want to contribute. Which is important because ultimately that is the only way the Council is going to build trust and have a two-way dialogue.

- In principle the Council's Consultation Hub is a useful tool in this because it sets a number of checkpoints before LBTH undertakes a consultation by making sure that you know the design of your consultation to meet the needs of people that you are targeting in that consultation on this you might want to target a specific group e.g. you might want to focus on the people who will be affected by a service change. Also, if LBTH use reputable survey methodologies and companies for the bigger consultations then they are bound by regulatory standards that their industry follows. Therefore, LBTH needs to make sure the quality of targeting is good and whilst you will never achieve perfection you do need to give people the opportunity to express themselves.
- How to get real engagement is a difficult one and it is easy to get people to say what they want to spend money whilst it is very hard to get them say what they do not want to spend money. Therefore, it is important to be honest and to ask where residents want Tower Hamlets to be in the next few decades and what are the trade-offs that are involved.
- Regarding the Council's online presence, it is important to understand what people are interested in by noting the newsletter subscribers and the proportion of visitors to the web site who follow a hypertext link to a particular topic. For example, the proportion of visitors to the Council's Facebook Page in Q2 reached was over 800,000; with 2.3m impressions on Twitter in Q2 (i.e. total tally of all the times a Tweet had appeared in a followers timeline or as a result of someone liking the Tweet). Whilst over the same period there was 80 engagements on Twitter (i.e. the number of times that a given Tweet was for example retweeted, hashtag clicks, mention clicks and media views).
- The Consultation Handbook provides tools for officers to really think through who they are engaging with and how they need to engage and the different types of methods (e.g. thinking about the types of questions being asked) because unless it is a two way conversation then there is little point in saying that this is a consultation. Also, officers are not limited to the kind of questions used or the methods to engage residents about current and future provision.
- There is a lot of creativity in the community and local community engagement should be about empowering councillors to seek residents' ideas and opinions. A genuine consultation process ensures that the Council has considered the impact of its policy options. This is likely to lead to better outcomes and greater acceptance in the community, particularly among any stakeholders who may be adversely affected by the policy.
- The Council is committed to involving residents in everything it does and strengthening its relationship with the people who live in or work in

Tower Hamlets. It's key that the Council listens to the views of residents, businesses and partners to shape the design of local services, develop policies; and focus on those issues that are of concern to them and the communities that the Council seeks to serve.

- The extent to which residents feel informed and engaged by the Council, and the trust that they place in them, directly affects their views about Tower Hamlets and the services they receive. This in turn impacts on their levels of satisfaction and ultimately, the Council's public reputation.

In conclusion, the Chair:

1. Thanked the Mayor John Biggs; Sharon Godman, Andreas Christophorou, Emily Fieran-Reed and Claire Harding for their presentation's and contributions to tonight's meeting; and
2. Indicated that there be a progress report on Resident Engagement in the new year.

7.4 Councillor Call for Action Guide

The Committee received and noted a presentation from Adam Boey Senior Strategy & Policy Manager on a report regarding the Councillor Call for Action guidance which is to go to the Council's General Purposes Committee on 8th December, together with draft guidance intended to improve clarity and processes around Councillors being able to raise local matters of concern, where all other avenues have been exhausted. The main points of the discussion on this report are outlined as follows:

The Committee noted that:

- The CCfA guide has been developed as part of the strengthening local democracy framework. It allows Councillors to raise issues or matters of local concern and affecting their ward for consideration by OSC. The Localism Act 2011 broadens this so that councillors can refer matters which are not restricted to local government.
- A CCfA can be used to tackle problems on a neighbourhood or ward specific level which has been unable to resolve through normal channels e.g. corporate complaints, petitions, Member's Enquiries, Freedom of Information (FOI) requests and mediation. It is at the discretion of each councillor as to what issues they wish to raise for a potential review through the CCfA. However, councillors must demonstrate that other methods of resolution have been exhausted first. A CCfA request should not be considered as merely 'scrutiny process' it should be viewed as a whole council approach, that can assist councillors to resolve issues on behalf of their constituents.
- There is some circumstance where a CCfA will not be dealt with under this scheme as specified by the limitations of a CCfA; or any other circumstances which, in the opinion of the Statutory Scrutiny Officer would mean the CCfA would be better dealt with using a different Council procedure.

- Depending on the nature of the request once it has been considered a report will be produced together with a set of recommendations and those responsible for implementing the recommendations to a relevant service area will provide an update report as necessary to the Committee.

The Chair then **Moved**, and it was:

RESOLVED that:

In general, the Committee welcomed this work and the embedding of the Councillor Call for Action in the constitution, and the guidance for Members and officers.

8. PRE-DECISION SCRUTINY OF UNRESTRICTED CABINET PAPERS

Following comments by the Committee the Pre-Decision Scrutiny Questions (PDSQ) were agreed for submission to the Mayor in Cabinet on the 25th November 2020 (**See attached appendix**).

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

Nil items

10. EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

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

11. EXEMPT/ CONFIDENTIAL MINUTES

Nil items

12. EXEMPT/ CONFIDENTIAL REPORTS 'CALLED IN'

Nil items

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

Nil items

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

Nil items

The meeting ended at 7.15 p.m.

**Chair, Councillor James King
Overview & Scrutiny Committee**