

**LONDON BOROUGH OF TOWER HAMLETS**

**MINUTES OF THE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**HELD AT 6.31 P.M. ON MONDAY, 1 MARCH 2021**

**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)	
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
Councillor Andrew Wood	

**Other Councillors Present:**

Mayor John Biggs  
Councillor Sirajul Islam  
Councillor Candida Ronald

**Officers Present:**

Kevin Bartle	– (Corporate Director, Resources and Governance)
Adam Boey	– (Senior Strategy & Policy Manager - Corporate)
Ann Corbett	– (Divisional Director, Community Safety)
Thorsten Dreyer	– (Head of Intelligence and Performance)
Sharon Godman	– (Director, Strategy, Improvement and Transformation)
Afazul Hoque	– (Head of Corporate Strategy & Policy)
Hitesh Jolapara	– (Interim Divisional Director, Finance, Procurement & Audit)
Filuck Miah	– (Strategy and Policy Officer, Corporate Strategy and Policy)

Denise Radley	Team)
Will Tuckley	– (Corporate Director, Health, Adults & Community)
David Knight	– (Chief Executive)
	– (Democratic Services Officer, Committees, Governance)

## 1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

No apologies for absence were received at this meeting.

## 2. DECLARATIONS OF DISCLOSABLE PECUNIARY INTEREST AND OTHER INTERESTS

The following Members for transparency declared a potential interest in relation to Item 9 Pre-Decision Scrutiny Questions:

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

## 3. UNRESTRICTED MINUTES

### 3.1 Minutes of the 25th January, 2021

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

#### **RESOLVED**

That the unrestricted minutes of the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 25<sup>th</sup> January 2020 be approved as a correct record of the proceedings and the Chair was authorised to sign them accordingly.

### 3.2 Minutes of 1st February, 2021

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

#### **RESOLVED**

That the unrestricted minutes of the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 1<sup>st</sup> February 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. COVID 19 - UPDATE

The Committee received an update from Covid-19 from Somen Banerjee – Director of Public Health, the main points of the questioning maybe summarised as follows:

The Committee:

- ❖ Was advised that since January there has been a significant improvement although the incidences of epidemic remain in the 25- to 34-year-olds and the 55- to 64-year-olds.
- ❖ Noted that across the Borough the highest levels are in Poplar; Bromley by Bow and Shadwell and the disparity trends to continue by ethnicity and is particularly prevalent amongst the Black African and Bangladeshi populations. Whilst there is still a disproportionately high number of cases in the Boroughs social housing.
- ❖ Noted that 40,000 Tower Hamlets residents have now had at least the first dose in terms of the priority the initial priority groups 80% of 80yrs and above; 78% of 75yrs to 79yrs and 39% of the clinically extremely vulnerable group. Although it was noted that this category has now been expanded from 9,000 based on the original criterion to 25,000 to the new criterion as clinically extremely vulnerable based on social variables such as ethnicity; deprivation and body-mass index. This has a particular effect on Tower Hamlets relative to other London boroughs as the number of clinically extremely vulnerable and has increased to a higher level than other boroughs across North-East London primarily because of ethnicity and deprivation.
- ❖ Noted that those individuals who are not taking up vaccine will be contacted to talk through if they have any issues about the vaccines and how those issues can be resolved.
- ❖ Noted that from the 1st of February 2021 a Vaccine Helpline funded by LBTH and supported with training and resources by GP Care Group had been established and is now open 7 days per week, between 8:00 am to 8:00 pm with multilingual staff to (i) answer queries; (ii) contact those who are vaccine hesitant; (iii) book appointments to local clinics and mass vaccination centres.
- ❖ Accepted that the impact of COVID-19 on communities was going to rely in part on the quality of communication regarding health risk and danger. Any co-ordinated approach by partners and stakeholders needs to take full account of the way life conditions, cultural values, and risk experience affect actions during a pandemic. Unfamiliarity with sociocultural, economic, psychological, and health factors within any community can jeopardise effective communication at all levels.
- ❖ Was advised that people with Learning Difficulties will now be prioritised for a Covid vaccine as they face a higher risk of death from Covid-19 and so will now be moved up the priority list.

- ❖ Noted that the Government is piloting a new diagnostic test, called a lateral flow test, for detecting the virus that causes Covid and to prioritise schools so when students go back to school, they will be given lateral flow tests in the school. However, the purpose of these lateral flow tests is to familiarise them with taking these tests at home so that it becomes part of routine life school children and children will self-administer lateral flow tests around twice a week. In addition, there will be an emphasis on families with an expansion of the availability of home testing through collection points.
- ❖ Noted that all businesses in England are now able to sign up to the Government's free COVID-19 workplace testing programme. Which is part of the Government's roadmap to cautiously lift restrictions, businesses of all sizes, including those with fewer than 50 employees, can register from today to order free lateral flow tests for their employees.
- ❖ Noted that approximately 1 in 3 people with Covid do not have symptoms, which means they could be spreading the virus in workplaces without knowing. As rapid testing detects cases quickly (in under 30 minutes) this means that positive cases can isolate immediately, breaking chains of transmission.
- ❖ Noted that regular testing could be the difference between a workplace being able to stay open and operational, or needing to close due to a Covid outbreak. It will therefore form a crucial part of the Government's plan to ease restrictions gradually and safely as we get back to a more normal life.
- ❖ Was advised that successful management of local outbreaks is a core element of NHS Test and Trace's ambition to break the chains of Covid transmission to enable people to return to and maintain a more normal way of life.
- ❖ Was informed that it in combating Covid it was critical to develop structures and ways of working, alongside existing emergency response mechanisms and to maximise their effectiveness.
- ❖ Commented that many Borough's Bangladeshi population live in extended families, often, with three generations under one roof. This means there are potentially a higher number of carriers who can infect an elderly relative. An older person also cannot effectively self-isolate when they are living in close quarters with their extended family.
- ❖ Indicated that all this makes Covid particularly troubling in Bangladeshi communities, some of which are, like Tower Hamlets, in the most deprived areas of the country, with poor health outcomes to match.
- ❖ Was pleased to note that going forward there would be increased use of the community-based venues for residents to get vaccinated **e.g.** GP Practices.
- ❖ Noted that there is emerging evidence on the long-term health effects of Covid **e.g.** long-term respiratory complications, thrombosis, heart failure, kidney injury, fatigue, joint and muscle pain, and metabolic abnormalities. However, long-term cohort studies are needed to better understand disease consequences in Covid patients.
- ❖ Noted that patients have experienced ongoing COVID-19 symptoms for several months after infection. These include fatigue, difficulties in

thinking, shortness of breath, chest pain, irregular or abnormal heart rhythm, and joint pain.

- ❖ Acknowledge that the pandemic is a chronic health crisis and clinicians will be required to maintain a state of high alert for an extended period
- ❖ Commented that the referendum in Tower Hamlets must be conducted safely against the backdrop of coronavirus restrictions, although there will need to be a risk assessment of key proceedings and put in place appropriate mitigations and additional measures to ensure that public health advice around physical distancing, proper hand hygiene and the use of face coverings is followed.
- ❖ Venues and staffing for the referendum are crucial, the Council should consider whether the venues they plan to use for polling and other election proceedings, including the count, allow for physical distancing. The Council also needs to consider whether they will need additional staff to assist with key aspects of the election in the context of Covid.
- ❖ Wanted to see early engagement with key stakeholders in the Borough including political parties, candidates, and agents is important, especially where normal arrangements may need to be adapted in line with Covid restrictions and public health advice.

In conclusion, the Chair thanked Somen Banerjee for his detailed presentation and to all members and guests for their contributions in the discussions on this topic.

## **7. UNRESTRICTED CABINET REPORTS FOR CONSIDERATION**

### **7.1 Strategic Performance & Delivery Reporting - Q3 2020/21**

The Committee received and commented on the strategic delivery and performance report for quarter 3 2020/21. The main points raised in the discussion on the report may be summarised as follows:

The Committee:

- ❖ Noted that 15 performance indicators have been met or are exceeding their target and 8 are between the target and the minimum expectation, while 13 are falling short. Whilst the remaining 20 indicators are data only measures, do not have an outturn this quarter or they are based on the annual residents' survey which is due to take place in quarter 4.
- ❖ Noted that due to Covid some indicators for which data collection have been suspended or are not possible at present.
- ❖ Expressed concern that the number of adults supported into employment by the WorkPath service have fallen short of the minimum expectation as the labour market in the Borough continues to be particularly affected by the Covid and the lockdown measures to contain it. Also, like Inner London generally Tower Hamlets has experienced sharper decreases in those in paid employment when compared to Outer London.

- ❖ Noted that a greater proportion of Londoners across all age groups are now claiming unemployment related benefits compared with the rest of the Country.
- ❖ Expressed concern that younger people, especially those who have recently left education, have been especially hard hit by the economic impact of the pandemic. With youth unemployment increasing significantly.
- ❖ Stated that supporting and encouraging employers to provide opportunities for young people to access work experience, employment and training opportunities during this difficult period is vital. Previous recessions have highlighted the damaging long-term consequences of a period of unemployment when young to future earnings and employment outcomes, as well as on mental and physical health.
- ❖ Indicated their concern that in Quarter 2 the target for 22 per cent of household waste recycling was missed with only 19.8 per cent being achieved. However, officers (i) are redesigning the Service to improve recycling rates; (ii) are continuing to communicate the importance of recycling to residents and landlords to try and drive behavioural change; and (iii) can provide the Quarter 3 figures to the Committee once they become available.
- ❖ Noted that street cleansing service has been affected adversely by Covid as (i) a significant number of regular staff have been absent due to illness and/or self-isolation; and (ii) there has been a behavioural change in the Borough with people being at home has impacted on the cleanliness of local parks and seen the introduction of new technology to help identify hotspots and target resources to those areas quickly.
- ❖ Indicated that it was important to work with residents and businesses of Tower Hamlets to encourage and enable ways of dealing with waste
- ❖ Supported the Councils intention to collaborate with and provide leadership to businesses, housing associations and others that have a responsibility for managing waste.
- ❖ Recognised the challenges faced by the Service with (i) the number of businesses and people working in Tower Hamlets increasing; and (ii) 80 per cent of the population living in flats.
- ❖ Wanted the Service to think about food waste recycling from private blocks as well as from estates given the demand for this service from within private developments.
- ❖ Was informed that since the start of the pandemic, LBTH has provided food provisions to support residents in poverty. E.g. (i) processed 4,952 referrals to food banks and voluntary and community sector organisations supporting those residents experiencing food poverty; and (ii) in November agreed a grant of £100,000 to support the Tower Hamlets Credit Union and other initiatives to increase access to fair finance including the un-banked, under-banked and small businesses.
- ❖ Noted that LBTH have continued to target those groups most likely out of work and the Financial and benefits advice service is rapidly changing its offer to focus on the pandemic recovery.
- ❖ Wanted to know (i) what was considered the best way was to help people in need when seek help through the Council and its partner organisations in these difficult times with universal credit, rent, council

tax, financial debts, and support with other needs; and (ii) how the Council works with other specialist organisations in the Borough who they can refer people to if needed.

In conclusion, the Chair:

1. **Thanked** Mayor John Biggs; Will Tuckley and Thorsten Dreyer for their presentation and to all members and guests for their contributions to the discussion on this topic; and
2. **Indicated** that Street Cleanliness; Universal Credit Benefit Maximisation; WorkPath and Advice Programmes should be added to the Committees Action Log.

## 7.2 Budget monitoring report 2020-21 as at 31st December 2020 (period 9)

The Committee received and commented on the Council's projected outturn position against General Fund, Dedicated Schools Budget, Housing Revenue Account, and earmarked reserves for 2020-21, based on forecasts as of 31st December 2020. The main points of the discussion arising from questioning on the report may be summarised as follows:

The Committee:

- ❖ Noted that (i) the General Fund forecast position is a net overspend of £2.9m, a £3.2m deterioration on the P8 forecast; (ii) there is an underlying overspend of £15.2m in services (before contributions from reserves of £13m); and (iii) there are significant savings to be delivered in 2021/22, so strategically these are very challenging circumstances.
- ❖ Was troubled to note that (i) any overspend at the year-end will have to be financed from reserves; and (ii) the reserves position remains uncertain pending the delayed closure and audit of the Council's accounts for the period 2016 – 2020.
- ❖ Was concerned that the Council's response to the pandemic continues to overlay considerable complexity and uncertainty to forecasting, given that the financial impact ranges from additional expenditure requirements, increases in demand from vulnerable clients, consequential losses of income, unachievable savings and for services having to work differently.
- ❖ Was informed that the forecasting in this area is also affected both by the unknown length of the emergency and indeed the extent and depth of any consequential recession. Therefore, it was important the Council gets great clarity in respect of reporting and monitoring if it is to address it's a "very challenging" financial position and delivers the planned savings.
- ❖ Was advised that Tower Hamlets as are all councils is finding it impossible to plan for the pandemic as the Council is in the middle of trying to deliver services and the financial position has been running behind the delivery of services.

- ❖ Was informed that the underspend on the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) is to do with the day-to-day maintenance and repairs programme and not the long-term capital programme
- ❖ Wanted to know how the Council intends (i) to develop forecasts and projections to highlight areas of likely financial failure and to move to financial sustainability; (ii) to spend the Covid Emergency Funding for related expenditure.
- ❖ Noted that due to Covid whilst the Council has had underspends in Housing; Regeneration; Public Realm; Planning; Building Control that are not expected to see replicated in future years.
- ❖ Commented that if the Council is going to arrest the ongoing decline of the reserves it is essential that the responsible officers spend within their budgets.
- ❖ Wanted to receive an explanation on the reasons for the overspend in regarding Homeless Services

In conclusion, the Chair:

- A. **Thanked** Councillor Candida Ronald; Kevin Bartle; and Hitesh Jolapara for their presentation and to all members for their contributions in the discussions on this topic; and
- B. **Indicated** that the following should be added to the Committees Action Log (i) details of necessary and additional Covid-19 expenditure; (ii) the development of forecasts and projections to highlight areas of likely financial failure and move to financial sustainability; (iii) to spend the Covid Emergency Funding for related expenditure; (iv) Why there was an overspend in Homeless Services.

### 7.3 Community Safety Partnership Plan 2021-2024

The Committee received and commented on the Community Safety Partnership Plan 2021-23. The main points of the discussion on the report may be summarised as follows:

The Committee:

- ❖ Welcomed the partnership Community Safety Plan for 2021-24 and the priorities set out in the plan.
- ❖ Noted that the Crime and Anti-social behaviour continue to be a key priority for residents as highlighted in the Annual Residents Survey. From the 2019 survey we know 48% of residents said that crime and ASB as their top concern.
- ❖ Noted a number of indicators on concerns about ASB being problem that had risen over the year including:
  - A. People using or dealing drugs.
  - B. People being drunk or rowdy.
  - C. Noisy neighbours; and
  - D. Vandalism and graffiti.



- ❖ Noted in the report the Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on crime and ASB and as there was no Annual Residents Survey last year these indicators were also likely to rise. The Committee was pleased therefore that tackling neighbourhood crime and ASB is reflected as a priority in the Plan.
- ❖ Noted that LBTH had the highest level of reported ASB in London and that Covid and lockdown measures were contributing to rise in demand. It also noted that substance misuse is one the key drivers for ASB. The Community Safety Partnership confirmed that it was managing ASB levels using engagement, support and enforcement model for people engaged in substance misuse.
- ❖ Wanted to ensure partnership work with RSLs is reflected in the plan. Many larger ones are focused on addressing ASB with patrol services like Parkguard. It is particularly key LBTH ensures THH are achieving value for money from their ASB services now that patrol services have been passed directly to tenants and leaseholders.
- ❖ Questioned whether increase reporting of ASB a good sign of people's confidence in systems for reporting is or whether it was as a result of people seeing more ASB.
- ❖ Wanted to see performance indicators against the outcomes that the partnership is seeking to achieve to enable the partnership to measure progress and also for the public to be able to hold agencies to account.
- ❖ Wanted to see the delivery plan on tackling neighbourhood crime and ASB and have an opportunity to feed into this.
- ❖ Indicated that given the on-going discussion about the Chinese Embassy and the need for visible and protective security this should be a key priority.
- ❖ Stressed the need for clear communication to residents about how to report ASB and who is responsible for addressing as there is still confusion amongst residents as they are passed on by agencies.
- ❖ Agreed that engaging, empowering, and hearing the voice and concerns of local residents needs to be at the forefront of the delivery and annual review of the plan.

In conclusion, the Chair:

- A. **Thanked** Councillor Sirajul Islam; Denise Radley; and Ann Corbett for their presentation and to all members for their contributions in the deliberations on this topic.
- B. **Indicated** that the comments of the Committee would be presented to the by Cabinet before the report is submitted to Full Council; and
- C. **Stated** that as part of the Committee's work programme for 2021-2022 it will be important to review progress against this plan and welcomed the engagement of partners in the scrutiny process.

## 8. CHAIRING OF THE MEETING

Councillor James King vacated the Chair and withdrew from the meeting.  
Councillor Bex White assumed the Chair for the rest of the meeting.

## 9. CHALLENGE SESSION REPORT

### 9.1 Idea Store and Library Services Scrutiny Challenge Session

The Committee received and noted a report on the Idea Store and Library Services Scrutiny Challenge Session. The main points of the discussion on the report is outlined below:

The Committee noted that:

- ❖ Councillor Leema Qureshi had decided to hold a Finance and Resource Scrutiny Challenge Session to focus on the Council's revised approach to Idea Stores and library services.
- ❖ The Challenge Session had been underpinned by the following core questions:
  - A. To what extent of change will the revised approach for Idea Stores and library services impact on user groups from the community? What are the planned mitigation options and what's the evidence from users and residents?
  - B. Based on the public engagement what can be learnt and taken forward or changed about the suggested proposals for the revised approach to Idea Stores and library services?
  - C. What is the five-year vision for the future for the future of the Idea Stores and library services including future funding proposals and risk implications?
- ❖ The Challenge Session held virtually on 28 January 2021 was chaired by Councillor Leema Qureshi (Scrutiny Lead for Finance and Resources). The session had been structured to included: Chair's overview - reason for the enquiry and session outcome, was a presentation from the service led by Cabinet Member for Culture, Arts and Brexit supported by council officers, Youth Council representatives provided service user feedback, Voluntary Sectors Children and Youth Forum Coordinator provided an external perspective from the Third Sector. The Challenge Session had resulted in the development of a number of recommendations set out in the attached report:

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

**RESOLVED** to:

1. **Note** the attached Idea Stores and Library Services Scrutiny Challenge Session Report and agree the recommendations; and
2. **Agreed** to submit the attached report to the Mayor and Cabinet for an executive response.

## 9.2 How does the Council apply evidence-based and best practice to influence resident behaviour change to boost recycling rates?

The Committee received a report that outlined the findings of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee's (OSC) Challenge Session examining how the Council applies evidence-based and best practice to influence resident behaviour to boost recycling. A summary of the discussion on the report is outlined as follows:

The Committee noted that:

- ❖ The former Scrutiny Lead for Environment and Community Safety, Councillor Bex White had decided to hold this Challenge Session with the focus on how the Council applies evidence-based and best practice to influence resident behaviour change to boost recycling rates?
- ❖ Tower Hamlets had performed poorly in terms of recycling waste (23.2% of total waste is recycled) compared to other boroughs (Bexley 54.1%, Waltham Forest 31.6%, Greenwich 33.4%, Hackney 27.9%, City of London 29.9%) with only Newham lower at 16.9%. Whilst Executive Mayor John Biggs had set an ambitious target for Tower Hamlets of 35% recycling by 2022.
- ❖ The Challenge Session had aimed to understand how the Council has responded to the flagging recycling rates in the Borough, with a particular focus on influencing resident behaviour.
- ❖ The Challenge Session had been underpinned by the following core questions:
  - A. To what extent is evidence based and external research applied in how the Council uses its resources to achieve behaviour change on recycling?
  - B. How is the Council using outcomes of pilot projects to improve mainstream delivery?
  - C. How is the Council maximising the influence on residents including those schools who are very committed to increasing recycling?
  - D. Can the Council highlight any insights (behavioural change) on campaigns for resident engagement on recycling and the impact?
- ❖ The Challenge Session had been held virtually on 23 September 2020 and chaired by Councillor Bex White commencing with a Chair's overview, followed by a joint presentation from the former Cabinet Member for Environment and Public Realm, Councillor Asma Islam, supported by council officers.
- ❖ Resource London had also been invited to the session as they are (i) a London-wide partnership programme; and (ii) the Government efficiency resource body.
- ❖ Resource London works closely with Tower Hamlets Waste and Recycling Service and they had provided an external perspective on insights from research such as factors influencing recycling behaviour change.

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

**RESOLVED** to:

1. **Note** the attached Scrutiny Challenge Session Report on how the Council applies evidence-based and best practice to influence resident behaviour change to boost recycling rates and agree the recommendations; and
2. **Agree** to submit the attached report to the Mayor and Cabinet for an executive response.

**10. PRE-DECISION SCRUTINY OF UNRESTRICTED CABINET PAPERS**

Following comments by the Committee the Pre-Decision Scrutiny Questions (PDSQ) were agreed for submission to the Cabinet on the 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2021 (**See attached appendix**).

**11. UPDATES FROM SCRUTINY LEADS**

The Committee **noted** the updates that had been submitted from the Scrutiny Leads (**See attached appendix**).

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

**12.1 Action Log 2020-21 Update**

Noted

**13. EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC**

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

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

Nil Items

The meeting ended at 8.33 p.m.  
Chair, Councillor James King  
Overview & Scrutiny Committee