

LONDON BOROUGH OF TOWER HAMLETS

MINUTES OF THE GENERAL PURPOSES COMMITTEE

HELD AT 6.30 P.M. ON TUESDAY, 12 DECEMBER 2023

**COMMITTEE ROOM - TOWER HAMLETS TOWN HALL, 160 WHITECHAPEL
ROAD, LONDON E1 1BJ**

Members Present in Person:

Councillor Shafi Ahmed
Councillor Saied Ahmed
Councillor Kabir Ahmed
Councillor Sabina Akhtar
Councillor James King
Councillor Rebaka Sultana
Councillor Maium Talukdar

Members Present virtually:

Councillor Asma Begum

Officers Present in Person:

Robert Curtis	(Head of Electoral Services)
Janet Fasan	(Director of Legal & Monitoring Officer)
Matthew Mannion	(Head of Democratic Services)
Lorraine Feyi-Shonubi	(Governor Services Officer)
Joel West	(Democratic Services Team Leader (Committee))

1. DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS

Further to Item 4.1, Councillor Shafi Ahmed asked the Committee to note that he was a school governor at a school in Whitechapel Ward, but the school was not mentioned in the report.

Further to Item 4.1, Councillor Maium Talukdar declared that he was a parent of children at Geroge Green School.

2. MINUTES

The unrestricted minutes of the General Purposes Committee meeting held on 28 September 2023 were agreed as a correct record.

3. WORK PLAN

RESOLVED that the work plan be noted.

4. REPORTS FOR CONSIDERATION

4.1 LA Governor Appointment Report December 2023

Note on order: the Chair indicated that he had received indications that some Committee members wished to discuss information provided in the exempt appendices. Accordingly, he took this item as last on the agenda (after Items 4.2 and 4.3).

The Reasons for Urgency as set out in the report were agreed.

Lorraine Feyi-Shonubi (Governor Services Officer) introduced the report that set out details of applicants who had applied to be nominated as the local authority governor at Tower Hamlets maintained schools. Lorraine explained that a high proportion of the applicants were from BAME backgrounds.

At this point, the Committee resolved to exclude the press and public (see Minute 6 for the full resolution).

Some members of the Committee indicated concern with the application information presented in the report and in the exempt appendices as:

- Some of the applicants' connections to the borough were unclear. For example, the question "Do you or have you had children attending schools in Tower Hamlets, been a school governor before or employed in a Tower Hamlets School or by the council?" covered a range of scenarios and answers were sometimes unclear to which element(s) they were responding affirmatively.
- Control of school governing bodies could be manipulated by persons who did not have the best interest of the school as motivation. For example, it could be used to instigate conversion to academy status against the wishes of the Council, parents and pupils. Knowing the closeness of governors' links to the local community was one way the Council could safeguard against this.
- The process for selection and preference of local authority governors was unclear. Some members indicated the Committee would welcome a work plan item looking at this in more detail.
- Vacancies for positions, even where long-term, were not evidence of lack of interest amongst local people. The Committee needs to investigate if there are additional barriers to their participation.

Other members of the Committee indicated the applicants as presented should be approved as:

- There was a rigorous process in place to select appropriate candidates who demonstrated the skills and attributes necessary to perform the role. The evidence before the Committee said the proposed candidates had passed that process and that the relevant schools had informed the Council they supported the appointments proposed.
- There was no criteria that school governors must be from or have connections to the local community.

- Recruitment to governor roles was challenging. One of the roles had reportedly been vacant for up to three years because the school felt previous candidates proposed by the Council did not have the necessary experience.
- It was understandable that persons in the education sphere are interested in pursuing a role as a governor and should be encouraged to take up vacant positions.

Other points raised by members included:

- Details of the demographic makeup of the board of governors in each case would be helpful.
- The Council should ensure applicants that have children attending schools in the borough have priority for local authority nominated school governor positions.

Councillor Maium Talukdar proposed, and Councillor Kabir Ahmed seconded a motion that candidate (b) be nominated to the indicated position and the remaining candidates' nominations be deferred until further information on the selection process for school governor applicants is received. On a vote of four in favour, three against and no abstentions, it was:

RESOLVED that:

1. Candidate (b) from paragraph 3.2 of the report is nominated to the position of local authority governor at Halley School.
2. The nominations of candidates a, c, d and e from paragraph 3.2 of the report are deferred pending review of additional information.

4.2 Guidance for Members and Officers on Outside Organisations

The reasons for urgency as set out in the report were agreed.

Janet Fasan, Director Legal and Monitoring Officer introduced the report that presented the current Guidance for Members and Officers on Outside Organisations and invited them to review the Guidance and consider whether it is content to approve the draft final version attached to this report. Janet explained the Guidance had been revised following helpful suggestions made by Standards Advisory Committee between September 2022 and September 2023. Matthew Mannion, (Head of Democratic Services) added further detail.

In response to questions from the Committee, Janet and Matthew:

- Asked members to note that any training related to this guidance could be funded from the corporate members training budget and that the member steering group on training could review how that training might look and whether an additional element could be added to the Councillor Role Profile to cover outside bodies duties.

- Attendance of members on outside bodies is not formally monitored by the Council, though nominees have an obligation to report back to the relevant nominator (which is usually the Mayor).
- The guidance is designed for persons appointed to outside bodies on behalf of the Council. The Council does not provide advice to Councillors for appointments undertaken in a person capacity.

RESOLVED that the General Purposes Committee:

1. Agrees The Guidance Members and Officers on Outside Organisations as attached at Appendix 1 to the report.
2. Notes that the guidance will be circulated to all Members and in particular those Members who are appointed to sit on Outside Bodies by the Council.

4.3 Review of polling places

Robert Curtis, (Head of Electoral Services) provided a verbal update for members on the progress and timetable of the review of polling places. Robert explained that the timetable had slipped and due to the potential combination that could happen with the GLA and General Election in early 2024, was unlikely to be completed by January 2024 as originally planned. Robert asked members to note that the review didn't have to finish until January 2025 so he recommended the Council maintained the status quo for the upcoming GLA and for the general election (if combined), then look at the review in greater detail or, if the GLA is a standalone election, continue the review shortly after that election.

Robert provided an overview of activity on the review to date, noting that

- Consultation responses had been low, with only 4 responses received. One of which was later withdrawn and the other three were relating to minor issues.
- There are some minor tweaks proposed to arrangements.
- A review on the policy of using schools as polling places was recommended as it was a cause of frequent enquiries.
- Initial results indicate that Canary Wharf would benefit from a closer review of polling arrangements.

Further to questions from the Committee, Robert:

- Explained that further to the low responses to the consultation, the elections service would ensure the Council is doing all it can to promote its consultation methods and to ensure they reached as wide an audience as possible and were accessible for all residents. He noted that 80 disabled organisations in the borough were contacted directly.
explained that anecdotal evidence suggested most voters are happy with current arrangements.

- Provided an update on the preparation for voter ID, including the numbers of applications for voter authority certificates. It was anticipated that applications for these, as with absent voter applications, would increase significantly if a General Election was announced. However, the Council was ahead of the curve in its preparations for this.
- Provided an overview of the new parliamentary constituencies: the borough would from the next General Election include 3 constituencies, one of which (Stratford and Bow) was under the jurisdiction of Newham election authority. Robert explained how the Council was planning for the challenges this presented and that whilst this was a new development for Tower Hamlets, shared constituencies were fairly common nationally.

Further to questions, Committee members made the following observations:

- venues that people familiar with and where turn-out had previously been high should be the preferred places and, conversely, places should be reviewed where their turnout is lower than expected.

Robert Curtis welcomed the contributions from Committee members as providing valuable local knowledge.

RESOLVED that the Committee noted the verbal update.

5. ANY OTHER BUSINESS WHICH THE CHAIR CONSIDERS URGENT

None.

6. EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

During consideration of Item 4.1, the Committee indicated it wished to discuss the candidates in more detail. It was therefore:

RESOLVED

1. 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 in Paragraphs 1 and 2 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A to the Local Government Act 1972.

The meeting ended at 7.50 p.m.

Chair, Councillor Shafi Ahmed
General Purposes Committee