

LONDON BOROUGH OF TOWER HAMLETS

DECISIONS OF THE COUNCIL

HELD AT 7.00 P.M. ON WEDNESDAY, 24 JANUARY 2024

COUNCIL CHAMBER - TOWN HALL, WHITECHAPEL

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received on behalf of:

- Councillor Maisha Begum
- Stephen Halsey – Chief Executive LBTH for whom Denise Radley, Deputy Chief Executive and Corporate Director, Health and Adults Social Care was deputising

Councillor Sabina Khan was unable to join the meeting in person but joined remotely. It was noted that she would be unable to vote as she was not formally in attendance.

2. DECLARATIONS OF DISCLOSABLE PECUNIARY INTERESTS AND OTHER INTERESTS

Councillor Musthak Ahmed declared a Non-Registerable Other Interest in Agenda Item 5.1 Petition on Saving THCAN as he was a Council appointee to the East End Citizen Advice Bureau who had links with THCAN. He remained in the meeting for discussion on that item.

3. MINUTES

DECISION

1. Agreed that the minutes of the ordinary Council meeting of 15th November 2023 be approved as a correct record of the proceedings and the Speaker was authorised to sign them accordingly.

4. TO RECEIVE ANNOUNCEMENTS (IF ANY) FROM THE SPEAKER OF THE COUNCIL OR THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE

Announcements from the Speaker and the Chief Executive.

See the minutes.

5. TO RECEIVE PETITIONS

5.1 Petition requesting Save THCAN

Sarah Sauvat, Vicky Scott and Shuhel Alom presented their petition requesting the saving of THCAN. Ms Sauvat stated the network had been instrumental in supporting advice services in Tower Hamlets for many years. She said that without funding THCAN could not support organisations and individuals like it had done in the past - through workshops, signposting, information and advice, training plus upskilling of staff in various disciplines such as bid and contract writing.

Ms Sauvat and her colleagues requested Members to continue to support THCAN as a vital network organisation.

Members asked questions of the petitioner before Councillor Saied Ahmed Cabinet Member for Resources and the Cost-of-Living responded to matters raised in the petition.

DECISION:

1. That the petition be referred to the Corporate Director for Communities for a written response within 28 days.

(**Action by:** Simon Baxter, Corporate Director for Communities)

5.2 Petition regarding restricting events in Victoria Park

Lauma Kalns-Timans and Anwar Miah presented their petition regarding the restriction of events held in Victoria Park. They called upon the Mayor to reverse the decision to increase the number of events held in Victoria Park. They stated local residents and the 'Friends of Victoria Park' group had not been consulted about the changes in policy. Ms Kalns-Timans said the extra events would increase the number of people who would attend each event from 5,000 to 20,000 and would ruin the park's environment and reduce accessibility to local residents, children and families especially during the summer holidays. Ms Kalns-Timans and Mr Miah asked the Mayor to reverse his decision.

Members asked questions of the petitioner before Councillor Iqbal Hossain, Cabinet Member for Culture and Recreation responded to matters raised in the petition.

DECISION:

1. That the petition be referred to the Corporate Director for Communities for a written response within 28 days.

(**Action by:** Simon Baxter, Corporate Director for Communities)

6. MAYOR'S REPORT

Mayor Lutfur Rahman presented his report to the Council.

The Opposition Group Leader, Councillor Sirajul Islam then responded briefly to the Mayor's report.

Mayor Rahman provided concluding remarks.

7. ADMINISTRATION MOTION DEBATE

MOTION ON COUNCIL'S PTS AND CFZ SCHEME

Council considered a motion as printed in the agenda on the Permit Transfer Scheme and Car Free Zone that had been moved by Councillor Kabir Hussain and seconded by Councillor Kabir Ahmed.

Council also considered the amendment proposed by Councillor Asma Islam and seconded by Councillor Rebeka Sultana as set out in the supplementary agenda.

ADDITIONS BOLD

DELETIONS ~~STRUCKTHROUGH~~

This council notes:

- The high levels of overcrowding in the borough, with over 23,000 residents currently on the housing waiting list, and 14,000 in acute overcrowding.
- The detrimental impact that such levels of overcrowding have on residents, affecting health; educational attainment; employment opportunities; and quality of life.
- That some residents rely on their cars and vehicles for business and familial duties of care.
- That despite this, Tower Hamlets has one of the lowest car ownership rates in the country, and the third lowest in London.
- That many residents refuse the chance to move to larger properties that could relieve some of these pressures associated with overcrowding, due to these properties' lack of a parking space.
- That this has contributed to the growing list of residents waiting for suitably-sized homes.
- **That the Car Free Zone policy was brought in nearly twenty years ago in an effort both to mitigate the impact of new development on the environment in Tower Hamlets and ensure existing car owners were not disadvantaged by significant numbers of new residents obtaining parking permits;**

- That there were many complaints from social housing tenants who were forced to give up their resident parking permit when they moved into a larger property within a scheme covered by a Car Free Zone restriction;
- That Some tenants moved into properties which were not advertised as being in a Car Free Zone, and some only belatedly became aware when LBTH began enforcing the restriction two or three years later;
- Residents living within a Car Free Zone development were not even entitled to Visitors Parking Scratch-cards;
- That on 29th November 2023 Mayor Lutfur Rahman and his administration agreed to change and amend the council's policy on PTS criteria however this change is not applied retrospectively to those who already are affected by this policy dating back over a decade.

This council believes:

- That the existing Permit Transfer Scheme (PTS) was unsuitable and incompatible with the needs of residents in Tower Hamlets.
- That the criteria to qualify for the Permit Transfer Scheme was too restrictive, and dissuaded residents from moving into new properties due to their fear of losing their car parking space.
- That a newer, bespoke approach to the scheme was required, and that this has been captured in the new PTS strategy adopted on 30th November.
- That the following principles will contribute to a reduction in overcrowding in Tower Hamlets:
 - Families will now qualify if they live in overcrowded properties and are moving into larger properties with two or more bedrooms, instead of three or more bedrooms.
 - A resident is no longer required to have held an on-street resident parking permit for 12 months prior to moving into a car-free property.
 - A resident no longer loses their right to a permit if it is cancelled or expires.
 - If one member of the household cancels their permit, then another member can apply for a new one.
 - An individual or family can now downsize and keep one resident permit under the PTS.
- That the related Car Free Zone (CFZ) scheme also unfairly punishes those residents who rely on their vehicles for work.

- That the proposed changes to the CFZ scheme being explored by the Mayor will complement the changes enacted by the review of the PTS scheme, where the new CFZ scheme would:
 - Apply to all residents living in car-free properties.
 - Allow for a maximum of three permits per household.
- That this new approach to the CFZ scheme – that would apply to residents who live in a car-free development who are not currently eligible to apply for an on-street parking permit, and their own vehicle is crucial to their livelihood and their ability to work, such as licensed mini cabbage (including Uber) – will halt the penalisation of those who rely on their vehicles to work, many of whom do so as second or third jobs.
- That this new approach to the CFZ scheme will contribute to the reduction of those numbers of residents currently on the housing waiting list and towards reducing overcrowding in the borough.
- That as well as implementing **the new PTS + CFZ** schemes to all future developments, the new provisions should be ~~—where possible—~~applied retrospectively to existing developments, to ensure that opportunities to support the reduction of overcrowding in the borough, as well as those residents who rely on their vehicles for work, can be maximised.

This council resolves:

- To support and promote this new PTS scheme, with a view to encouraging a shortening of the housing waiting list.
- To thank the Lead Member and officers for their work on the revised PTS scheme.
- To support the Lead Member and officers in the continued revision of the CFZ scheme.
- **To call on the Mayor Lutfur Rahman to ensure his PTS policy will be in effect retrospectively across all existing affected residents as well as new residents.**
- **To ensure that the retrospective application of the PTS are accommodated through the 2024/25 budget.**

Following debate, the amendment moved by Councillor Asma Islam was put to the vote and was **defeated**.

The motion as moved by Councillor Maium Miah Talukdar was put to the vote and was **agreed**.

DECISION**This council notes:**

- The high levels of overcrowding in the borough, with over 23,000 residents currently on the housing waiting list, and 14,000 in acute overcrowding.
- The detrimental impact that such levels of overcrowding have on residents, affecting health; educational attainment; employment opportunities; and quality of life.
- That some residents rely on their cars and vehicles for business and familial duties of care.
- That despite this, Tower Hamlets has one of the lowest car ownership rates in the country, and the third lowest in London.
- That many residents refuse the chance to move to larger properties that could relieve some of these pressures associated with overcrowding, due to these properties' lack of a parking space.
- That this has contributed to the growing list of residents waiting for suitably-sized homes.

This council believes:

- That the existing Permit Transfer Scheme (PTS) was unsuitable and incompatible with the needs of residents in Tower Hamlets.
- That the criteria to qualify for the Permit Transfer Scheme was too restrictive, and dissuaded residents from moving into new properties due to their fear of losing their car parking space.
- That a newer, bespoke approach to the scheme was required, and that this has been captured in the new PTS strategy adopted on 30th November.
- That the following principles will contribute to a reduction in overcrowding in Tower Hamlets:
 - Families will now qualify if they live in overcrowded properties and are moving into larger properties with two or more bedrooms, instead of three or more bedrooms.
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 - If one member of the household cancels their permit, then another member can apply for a new one.

- An individual or family can now downsize and keep one resident permit under the PTS.
- That the related Car Free Zone (CFZ) scheme also unfairly punishes those residents who rely on their vehicles for work.
- That the proposed changes to the CFZ scheme being explored by the Mayor will complement the changes enacted by the review of the PTS scheme, where the new CFZ scheme would:
 - Apply to all residents living in car-free properties.
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- That this new approach to the CFZ scheme – that would apply to residents who live in a car-free development who are not currently eligible to apply for an on-street parking permit, and their own vehicle is crucial to their livelihood and their ability to work, such as licensed mini cabbage (including Uber) – will halt the penalisation of those who rely on their vehicles to work, many of whom do so as second or third jobs.
- That this new approach to the CFZ scheme will contribute to the reduction of those numbers of residents currently on the housing waiting list and towards reducing overcrowding in the borough.
- That as well as implementing these new schemes to all future developments, the new provisions should be – where possible – applied retrospectively to existing developments, to ensure that opportunities to support the reduction of overcrowding in the borough, as well as those residents who rely on their vehicles for work, can be maximised.

This council resolves:

- To support and promote this new PTS scheme, with a view to encouraging a shortening of the housing waiting list.
- To thank the Lead Member and officers for their work on the revised PTS scheme.
- To support the Lead Member and officers in the continued revision of the CFZ scheme.

(Action by: Simon Baxter, Corporate Director, Communities)

8. OPPOSITION MOTION DEBATE

LGA Peer Review

Council considered a motion as printed in the agenda on the LGA Peer Review that had been moved by Councillor Marc Francis and seconded by Councillor Amina Ali.

Council also considered the amendment proposed by Councillor Maium Talukdar and seconded by Councillor Kabir Ahmed as set out in the supplementary agenda.

ADDITIONS BOLD

DELETIONS STRUCKTHROUGH

This council notes:

- An LGA Peer Review is designed to provide a **rigorous** critical-friend **review**. ~~external support, rather than an independent audit or inspection of the quality and performance of local authority services.~~
- **The LGA Corporate Peer Review is entirely independent of the Council and examines the performance of the Council holistically examining all of the Council's key performance metrics and their performance against them as well as addressing structure, the political interface, governance, leadership of place and organisation culture. The peer review is conducted by senior figures in the world of local government that in our case included Labour's Steve Bullock (ex-directly elected mayor of Lewisham) and Carolyn Downs who spent many years as Chief Executive of Brent, has previously been Chief executive of the LGA, Chief Executive of the Legal Services Commission and Deputy Permanent Secretary and Director General for Ministry of Justice. The Comment also ignores the fact that subsequent to the LGA review the Council underwent a further independent inspection and improved its performance for Investors In People confirming that the organisation had a robust and healthy approach to its staff and staff management.**
- **As you would expect** ~~However, this did not inhibit the LGA peer group from providing some stark wording in the~~ **useful** narrative ~~in~~ of the report itself and offer **valuable** ~~serious~~ recommendations ~~to address concerning issues regarding the political and executive management of the council.~~
- **In fact it was a well-considered balanced report that compares well with recent LGA reports into other local authorities given the unique social and economic profile of the Borough.**
- **The report concluded that the new administration:**
 - had provided a fresh impetus to the Council,
 - **Members and Officers had done well to delivery of election promises to date including free school meals and implementation of the educational maintenance allowance,**

- had a sound financial base.
- had an ambitious set of priorities that were widely understood by Members, Officers and Partners,
- Praised the Councils Communications team,
- Had a highly skilled, dedicated workforce evidently committed to delivering the best outcomes for the Borough,

Their report also:

- Commended the Council for developing a three year financial plan which will enable investment in services and priority areas once completed.
- Commended the Council for some very effective partnership working in Tower Hamlets
- Recognised statutory partnership working to be particularly strong.
- Commended the council for being committed to being a learning organisation with a genuine appetite to explore and adopt best practice.
- Acknowledged that the council demonstrated a high degree of organisational maturity in its positive response to critical challenge.
- Commended the Council for creating the Transformation Board.
- That the LGA Peer Review **agreed with the concerns that had been raised with it in advance of the review by the Mayor and the current CEO** ~~found that~~ “there are ‘two councils’ in operation at Tower Hamlets which is impacting on the speed and effectiveness of decision making.”
- The LGA also **expressed concerns around trust, sign off of decisions and delays to decision making.** ~~found “there is a lack of trust between the Mayor’s Office and senior officers, with examples of inappropriate questioning and pressure to feed things into the Mayor’s Office for ‘sign off’”.~~

- ~~• That this had led to: “unnecessary delays, with an example of one service area waiting for four months to receive a decision on something which would have previously been a delegated decision to officers.”~~
- **This was a legacy of the previous administration and Mayor who delegated significant mayoral powers to officers, which in our opinion left behind a culture of two councils. By contrast, the LGA concluded that ‘The Mayor is providing strong political leadership and is seen as approachable by both members and officers alike. Cabinet members are passionate about delivering the council’s priorities and want what is best for the residents across the borough’.**
- **The very positive IIP inspection that followed the LGA review suggests that the two-council culture issue is being addressed quickly and constructively and the new management team are bringing the staff with them on an improvement journey.**
- **The Action Plan report includes a review of the Mayor’s office which has already been completed leading to savings for the Council.** ~~–states “Some of the functions of the Mayor’s Office are duplicating existing structures causing confusion regarding internal governance processes within the council and as a result is. The size of the Mayor’s Office is an outlier when compared to other mayoral authorities and this is largely because there are many officers there who would ordinarily be located elsewhere in the council.”~~
- **The Mayor has empowered the Council, through strong central leadership and strategic direction, which has enabled the Council to reinvest in services. His Office has worked with services across the Council to deliver one of the most ambitious, progressive and expansive policy programmes seen in Local Government.**
- ~~Under the previous administration the 2021 LGA Peer review found that: “There is a strong and cohesive Senior Leadership Team well led by the Chief Executive, with all elements of the leadership team describing good member-officer relationships upon which decision-making is based.”~~
- **The 2023 LGA peer review makes clear that there has been a very considerable churn in senior management since May 2022 – which is not uncommon following a change of political and managerial leadership’ and it noted that the Council’s recruitment process was well underway.**, ~~which is potentially destabilising to the authority and unhelpful in securing improvements to performance.~~
- ~~To note further departures of senior staff and the failure to find appointable candidates to the roles of Corporate Director of Children’s Services and Housing & Regeneration.~~
- **During this period the Council has successfully embarked upon a major transformation and improvement programme, significantly**

improved its financial position, secured long overdue audit sign off of Council accounts, improved its IIP rating and supported the LGA Corporate Peer Challenge.

- The actions included in the Action Plan are drawn directly from the 70+ positive suggestions and recommendations contained within the LGA report. All of these have been addressed, often using the wording in the report to frame the action. To this extent there was limited necessity for content discussion. All of the LGA suggestions and recommendations are to be addressed via specific actions. This does not preclude collaboration or engagement in respect of the development of solutions and project leads are encouraged to engage all relevant stakeholders where practical. The CEO has extended an invitation to members of the Council to discuss the LGA Peer Review findings. The Corporate Peer Action Plan will be the subject of review by the Overview and Scrutiny committee on a regular basis. The first date for the committee to consider progress in relation to the action plan is currently being scheduled and will be revisited on a quarterly basis. This approach has been agreed with the Chair of the overview scrutiny committee and further details will be available on the councils committee website.
- ~~In response to the LGA Peer Review, Labour councillors offered to work with the Mayor and Corporate Leadership Team to help devise solutions to address these concerns, but that this offer was simply ignored and so~~ Opposition councillors **are being invited to attend a meeting with the Chief Executive to discuss the Corporate Challenge Review Report and Action Plan.**~~have been invited to a meeting with the~~ have had no input into what a corporate response should be.
- The peer review **noted** ~~was critical of~~ how scrutiny is conducted and found “the chair of the scrutiny committee and all sub committees are currently from the **majority** ruling party (Aspire) **as is common practice.** ~~which does not reflect best practice. This also means that all the Chairs are male.~~ Similarly, it **notes** ~~draws attention to~~ the absence of women in both the Cabinet **despite Aspire offering positions to opposition female councillors which were refused.** ~~itself and the political decision-making process. as being ‘concerning’.~~
- The Action Plan put forward in November ~~simply ignores the~~ **sets out actions to define current best practice in relation to chairing, membership, and cross party working in and of committees including the Overview & Scrutiny Committee its Sub-Committees and the Audit Committee. It will conduct a review of current terms of reference for committees based on best practice including the appointment of women to lead or undertake senior political positions within the council. The Mayor will receive recommendations from that review and agree any necessary actions. The Mayor’s conclusions will be**

~~published recommendation that should be Chaired by an Opposition councillor.~~

- **The Audit Committee has already considered the CIPFA recommendations on how its membership should be structured and agreed changes to ensure it remains robust and effective.**
- **In 2022 the Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed to Cllr Sabina Khan's appointment as a Scrutiny Lead. This year again the position was offered to a female opposition councillor. It is unfortunate that this was refused and a male labour Councillor was proposed. ~~Aspire councillors blocked the appointment of the Labour Group's nominee to the Lead Scrutiny Member for Resources portfolio, preferring to leave this position vacant to avoid a Labour councillor having the power to lead the scrutiny of Tower Hamlets Council's finances.~~**
- **~~The report notes that under this administration relationships with some third sector/voluntary partners "have weakened" possibly due to the introduction of the new mayor's community grant programme which has increased the number of organisations who can access Council grants. and that they "felt that they have not been properly involved in the co-design of the programme and as a result their confidence is low".~~**
- **The Council recognises the need to maintain good working relationships with all voluntary sector organisations where possible but also recognises that it may not be possible to please everyone when making structural decisions about the way in which resources are allocated. The Council continues to work closely with the Voluntary Sector to co-design new and improved partnership infrastructure via PEG and the root and branch review they are currently undertaking. The Council's partnership work also includes the development of a New Partnership Plan (recently approved) and it continues to work hard to strengthen and improve relationships with all our partners. The previous administration cut grants services to only 39 organisations funding 50 projects, to £2.6million per year. This has been increased to £4.5million a year with the transformed *Mayor's Community and Mayor's Small grants* scheme, which will see 86 organisations delivering 110 projects.**
- **Under the previous administration, the 2021 LGA Peer Review stated that: "Those in the Council reflect that partnership working came to the fore during the pandemic and continues to go from strength to strength for the benefit of residents and businesses and it was made clear to the peer team that partners are strongly committed to the ambitions of the Place". Which was in large part a commentary on statutory and health partnerships. The latest LGA report states that these 'statutory and health partnerships are of a good quality with health partners in particular referencing the strength of relationships in place with adult social care. These partnerships were strengthened during the COVID-19 pandemic, when an**

operational management group with health and care leaders was established. This strengthened trust has led to more effective partnership working which has resulted in improvements in many areas including reducing the number of delayed transfers from acute settings'. The corporate peer challenge report also referenced the council relationship with the Metropolitan Police stating that 'the Council's community safety work is considered sector leading by the Police who highly value their professional working relationship with the Council'. It is therefore not an accurate reflection of the LGA report to infer that partnership working under the previous administration was stronger.

This Council believes:

- The Action Plan's proposal of a Tower Hamlets Women Commission **must ensure that** ~~is a completely inadequate response to the lack of~~ female voices and those of people with different backgrounds to Aspire's Cabinet members **are effectively engaged** during decision-making processes.
- There are further commitments that are directly relevant to and supportive of the need to improve the profile of women in the Council and public life generally. These comprise:
 - Working with the LGA's Be a Councillor Campaign to encourage residents (especially women and those from under-represented groups) to stand for election,
 - conducting a review of terms of reference for committees based on best practice including the appointment of women to lead in the Council,
 - all parties will be encouraged to support this campaign and publish how they will actively encourage women candidates,
 - new initiatives to capture feedback from women regarding their experience of contributing to council meetings,
 - better codifying dedicated time for staff led group chairs to develop staff equalities networks,
 - review and re-run relevant staff and member awareness programmes.

- The Action Plan ~~does not adequately~~ addresses the LGA's recommendation that in the case of both grants and property disposals there should be involvement and oversight from the Overview and Scrutiny Committee with there also being an ability to 'call in' decisions **in line with the Council's Constitution.**
- **Both grants and property disposals can be and are scrutinised by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. As with all Member level decisions they can be called in.**
- The process proposed for "reviewing" the Mayor's Office **will follow the LGA Peer Review Recommendations.** ~~will not do anything to end either the perception or the reality of a "council within a council" culture identified by many staff and the LGA Peer Review Team.~~
- In the absence of meaningful cross-party engagement or even discussions by the Corporate Leadership Team with Opposition councillors, residents can have no confidence in the draft Action Plan. **Therefore, the Chief Executive has been liaising with Group Leaders on the Council about attending a meeting with the Chief Executive to discuss the Corporate Challenge Review Report and Action Plan.**

This council resolves:

- To **welcome the LGA Peer Review report and agree the comprehensive** ~~withdraw the draft~~ Action Plan and instruct the Corporate Leadership Team to engage with **all Opposition** ~~all~~ councillors **on the progress of the Action Plan.** ~~about what would be a realistic and useful set of changes to meet the criticism of Tower Hamlets Council's governance and to bring back a new Action Plan to Full Council within three months.~~

Following debate, the amendment moved by Councillor Maium Talukdar was put to the vote and was **agreed.**

The motion as amended by Councillor Maium Talukdar was put to the vote and was **agreed.**

DECISION

This council notes:

- An LGA Peer Review is designed to provide a rigorous critical-friend review.
- The LGA Corporate Peer Review is entirely independent of the Council and examines the performance of the Council holistically examining all of the Council's key performance metrics and their performance against them as well as addressing structure, the political interface, governance, leadership of place and organisation culture. The peer review is conducted by senior figures in the world of local government that in our case included Labour's Steve Bullock (ex-directly elected

mayor of Lewisham) and Carolyn Downs who spent many years as Chief Executive of Brent, has previously been Chief executive of the LGA, Chief Executive of the Legal Services Commission and Deputy Permanent Secretary and Director General for Ministry of Justice. The Comment also ignores the fact that subsequent to the LGA review the Council underwent a further independent inspection and improved its performance for Investors In People confirming that the organisation had a robust and healthy approach to its staff and staff management.

- As you would expect the LGA peer group provided useful narrative in the report itself and offer valuable recommendations regarding the political and executive management of the council.
- In fact it was a well-considered balanced report that compares well with recent LGA reports into other local authorities given the unique social and economic profile of the Borough.
- The report concluded that the new administration:
 - had provided a fresh impetus to the Council,
 - Members and Officers had done well to delivery of election promises to date including free school meals and implementation of the educational maintenance allowance,
 - had a sound financial base.
 - had an ambitious set of priorities that were widely understood by Members, Officers and Partners,
 - Praised the Councils Communications team,
 - Had a highly skilled, dedicated workforce evidently committed to delivering the best outcomes for the Borough,

Their report also:

- Commended the Council for developing a three year financial plan which will enable investment in services and priority areas once completed.
- Commended the Council for some very effective partnership working in Tower Hamlets

- Recognised statutory partnership working to be particularly strong.
- Commended the council for being committed to being a learning organisation with a genuine appetite to explore and adopt best practice.
- Acknowledged that the council demonstrated a high degree of organisational maturity in its positive response to critical challenge.
- Commended the Council for creating the Transformation Board.
- That the LGA Peer Review agreed with the concerns that had been raised with it in advance of the review by the Mayor and the current CEO that “there are ‘two councils’ in operation at Tower Hamlets which is impacting on the speed and effectiveness of decision making.”
- The LGA also expressed concerns around trust, sign off of decisions and delays to decision making.
- This was a legacy of the previous administration and Mayor who delegated significant mayoral powers to officers, which in our opinion left behind a culture of two councils. By contrast, the LGA concluded that ‘The Mayor is providing strong political leadership and is seen as approachable by both members and officers alike. Cabinet members are passionate about delivering the council’s priorities and want what is best for the residents across the borough’.
- The very positive IIP inspection that followed the LGA review suggests that the two-council culture issue is being addressed quickly and constructively and the new management team are bringing the staff with them on an improvement journey.
- The Action Plan report includes a review of the Mayor’s office which has already been completed leading to savings for the Council.
- The Mayor has empowered the Council, through strong central leadership and strategic direction, which has enabled the Council to reinvest in services. His Office has worked with services across the Council to deliver one of the most ambitious, progressive and expansive policy programmes seen in Local Government.
- The 2023 LGA peer review makes clear that there has been a very considerable churn in senior management since May 2022 – which is not uncommon following a change of political and managerial leadership’ and it noted that the Council’s recruitment process was well underway.

- During this period the Council has successfully embarked upon a major transformation and improvement programme, significantly improved its financial position, secured long overdue audit sign off of Council accounts, improved its IIP rating and supported the LGA Corporate Peer Challenge.
- The actions included in the Action Plan are drawn directly from the 70+ positive suggestions and recommendations contained within the LGA report. All of these have been addressed, often using the wording in the report to frame the action. To this extent there was limited necessity for content discussion. All of the LGA suggestions and recommendations are to be addressed via specific actions. This does not preclude collaboration or engagement in respect of the development of solutions and project leads are encouraged to engage all relevant stakeholders where practical. The CEO has extended an invitation to members of the Council to discuss the LGA Peer Review findings. The Corporate Peer Action Plan will be the subject of review by the Overview and Scrutiny committee on a regular basis. The first date for the committee to consider progress in relation to the action plan is currently being scheduled and will be revisited on a quarterly basis. This approach has been agreed with the Chair of the overview scrutiny committee and further details will be available on the councils committee website.
- Opposition councillors are being invited to attend a meeting with the Chief Executive to discuss the Corporate Challenge Review Report and Action Plan.
- The peer review noted how scrutiny is conducted and found “the chair of the scrutiny committee and all sub committees are currently from the majority ruling party (Aspire) as is common practice. Similarly, it notes the absence of women in the Cabinet despite Aspire offering positions to opposition female councillors which were refused.
- The Action Plan put forward in November sets out actions to define current best practice in relation to chairing, membership, and cross party working in and of committees including the Overview & Scrutiny Committee its Sub-Committees and the Audit Committee. It will conduct a review of current terms of reference for committees based on best practice including the appointment of women to lead or undertake senior political positions within the council. The Mayor will receive recommendations from that review and agree any necessary actions. The Mayor’s conclusions will be published.
- The Audit Committee has already considered the CIPFA recommendations on how its membership should be structured and agreed changes to ensure it remains robust and effective.
- In 2022 the Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed to Cllr Sabina Khan’s appointment as a Scrutiny Lead. This year again the position was offered to a female opposition councillor. It is unfortunate that this was refused and a male labour Councillor was proposed.

- The report notes—that relationships with some third sector/voluntary partners “have weakened” possibly due to the introduction of the new community grant programme which has increased the number of organisations who can access Council grants.
- The Council recognises the need to maintain good working relationships with all voluntary sector organisations where possible but also recognises that it may not be possible to please everyone when making structural decisions about the way in which resources are allocated. The Council continues to work closely with the Voluntary Sector to co-design new and improved partnership infrastructure via PEG and the root and branch review they are currently undertaking. The Council’s partnership work also includes the development of a New Partnership Plan (recently approved) and it continues to work hard to strengthen and improve relationships with all our partners. The previous administration cut grants services to only 39 organisations funding 50 projects, to £2.6million per year. This has been increased to £4.5million a year with the transformed *Mayor’s Community* and *Mayor’s Small* grants scheme, which will see 86 organisations delivering 110 projects.
- Under the previous administration, the 2021 LGA Peer Review stated that: “Those in the Council reflect that partnership working came to the fore during the pandemic and continues to go from strength to strength for the benefit of residents and businesses and it was made clear to the peer team that partners are strongly committed to the ambitions of the Place”. Which was in large part a commentary on statutory and health partnerships. The latest LGA report states that these ‘statutory and health partnerships are of a good quality with health partners in particular referencing the strength of relationships in place with adult social care. These partnerships were strengthened during the COVID-19 pandemic, when an operational management group with health and care leaders was established. This strengthened trust has led to more effective partnership working which has resulted in improvements in many areas including reducing the number of delayed transfers from acute settings’. The corporate peer challenge report also referenced the council relationship with the Metropolitan Police stating that ‘the Council’s community safety work is considered sector leading by the Police who highly value their professional working relationship with the Council’. It is therefore not an accurate reflection of the LGA report to infer that partnership working under the previous administration was stronger.

This Council believes:

- The Action Plan’s proposal of a Tower Hamlets Women Commission must ensure that female voices and those of people with different backgrounds to Aspire’s Cabinet members are effectively engaged during its decision-making processes.

- There are further commitments that are directly relevant to and supportive of the need to improve the profile of women in the Council and public life generally. These comprise:
 - Working with the LGA's Be a Councillor Campaign to encourage residents (especially women and those from under-represented groups) to stand for election,
 - conducting a review of terms of reference for committees based on best practice including the appointment of women to lead in the Council,
 - all parties will be encouraged to support this campaign and publish how they will actively encourage women candidates,
 - new initiatives to capture feedback from women regarding their experience of contributing to council meetings,
 - better codifying dedicated time for staff led group chairs to develop staff equalities networks,
 - review and re-run relevant staff and member awareness programmes.
- The Action Plan addresses the LGA's recommendation that in the case of both grants and property disposals there should be involvement and oversight from the Overview and Scrutiny Committee with there also being an ability to 'call in' decisions in line with the Council's Constitution.
- Both grants and property disposals can be and are scrutinised by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. As with all Member level decisions they can be called in.
- The process proposed for "reviewing" the Mayor's Office will follow the LGA Peer Review Recommendations.
- In the absence of meaningful cross-party engagement or even discussions by the Corporate Leadership Team with Opposition councillors, residents can have no confidence in the draft Action Plan. Therefore, the Chief Executive has been liaising with Group Leaders on the Council about attending a meeting with the Chief Executive to discuss the Corporate Challenge Review Report and Action Plan.

This council resolves:

- To welcome the LGA Peer Review report and agree the comprehensive Action Plan and instruct the Corporate Leadership Team to engage with all councillors on the progress of the Action Plan.

9. REPORTS FROM THE EXECUTIVE AND THE COUNCIL'S COMMITTEES

9.1 Report of the Executive: Youth Justice Board Annual Report

Councillor Maium Talukdar, Deputy Mayor and Cabinet Member for Education, Youth and Lifelong Learning, presented the annual report. He outlined the achievements of the Youth Justice Board before members added their comments.

DECISION

Council **AGREED**:

- 1) the Youth Justice Plan set out in Appendix 1 to the Youth Justice Board report attached to the cover sheet.

9.2 Report of the Executive: Council Tax Discounts and Premiums for Empty Properties and Second Homes

Councillor Saied Ahmed, Cabinet Member for Resources and Cost-of-living introduced the report. He stated the report set out the proposed Council Tax Discounts and Premiums for Empty Properties and Second Homes. He said this formed part of the Budget and Policy framework which required approval by Council. Members of the Council commented on the report.

DECISION

Council **AGREED** to:

The Council is recommended to:

1. Reduce the current 100% discount awarded to unoccupied and unfurnished and uninhabitable dwellings to zero (0%) for the financial year 2024/25 onwards.
2. From 1 April 2024, amend the application of the levy of 100% premium for long-term empty properties to 1 year reducing this from the current 2 years.
3. From 1 April 2024 levy an additional premium on long-term empty property vacant for over 5 years at the maximum permitted level of 200%. The resulting charge will be 300% of the standard Council Tax.

4. From 1 April 2024 levy an additional premium on long-term empty property vacant for over 10 years at the maximum permitted level of 300%. The resulting charge will be 400% of the standard Council Tax.
5. Council be given the discretion, delegated to the Head of Revenues and Benefits to reduce or waive the long-term empty premium charge in exceptional circumstances.
6. Give 12 months' notice that the Council will introduce a second home premium of 100% from 1 April 2025.

10. OTHER BUSINESS

10.1 Proportionality and Allocation of Places on Committees of the Council 2023/24

Councillor Maium Talukdar, Deputy Mayor and Cabinet Member for Education, Youth and Lifelong Learning introduced the report.

Members of the Council commented on the report.

DECISION

Council **AGREED** to:

1. Consider the review of proportionality as at Section 3 of this report and the allocation of seats on Committees and Sub-Committees for the remainder of the Municipal Year 2023/24 as set out at paragraph 3.6.
2. Note the Committees set out for the municipal year 2023/24 listed in paragraph 3.6 as agreed at the Annual Council meeting held on Wednesday 17 May 2023.
3. Agree any changes to the memberships (and substitutes) of those Committees as tabled at this Council meeting for approval.
4. To note that the Monitoring Officer is authorised to approve the appointment of Councillors required to fill positions that fall vacant during the municipal year in line with the proportionality arrangements set out in this report from nominations received from the political groups.
5. Agree that the Monitoring Officer be authorised to approve the appointment of ungrouped Councillors to any committee places not allocated by the Council to a political group, after consultation with those Councillors and the Speaker of the Council where there is only one application for the position (where there is more than one application these will be presented to Council for decision).

6. **AGREED and APPORVED** the appointment of Councillor Peter Golds to the General Purposes Committee and Councillor Nathalie Bienfait to the Strategic Development Committee.

11. TO RECEIVE WRITTEN QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL

The following questions and in each case supplementary questions were put (except where indicated) and were responded to by the Mayor or relevant Executive Member.

- 11.1 Question from Councillor Amin Rahman regarding the Council's accounts. A supplemental question was asked.
- 11.2 Question from Councillor Mohammad Chowdhury about representation on the Health and Wellbeing Board. No supplemental question was asked.
- 11.3 Question from Councillor Ahmodul Kabir regarding support provided to residents in emergency situations. A supplemental question was asked.
- 11.4 Question from Councillor Marc Francis about Occupational Therapist assessments. A supplemental question was asked.
- 11.5 Question from Councillor Shafi Ahmed regarding anti-social behaviour. A supplemental question was asked.
- 11.6 Question from Councillor Mufedah Bustin relating NCIL allocations. A supplementary question was asked.

Questions 11.8 to 11.27 were not put due to lack of time.

(**Action by:** Matthew Mannion, Head of Democratic Services to arrange written responses)

12. TO CONSIDER MOTIONS SUBMITTED BY MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL

Motions 12.1 and 12.2 were not considered due to lack of time.

The meeting ended at 10.08 p.m.