

LONDON BOROUGH OF TOWER HAMLETS

MINUTES OF THE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

HELD AT 7.15 P.M. ON MONDAY, 29 FEBRUARY 2016

**ROOM C1, 1ST FLOOR, TOWN HALL, MULBERRY PLACE, 5 CLOVE
CRESCENT, LONDON, E14 2BG**

Members Present:

Councillor John Pierce (Chair)	
Councillor Danny Hassell (Vice-Chair)	Scrutiny Lead for Children's Services
Councillor Amina Ali	Scrutiny Lead for Adult Health and Wellbeing
Councillor Peter Golds	Scrutiny Lead for Law Probity and Governance
Councillor Denise Jones	Scrutiny Lead for Communities, Localities & Culture
Councillor Helal Uddin	Scrutiny Lead for Development and Renewal
Councillor Mahbub Alam	

Co-opted Members Present:

Nozrul Mustafa	– (Parent Governor Representative)
Victoria Ekubia	– (Roman Catholic Church Representative)
Dr Phillip Rice	– (Church of England Representative)

Other Councillors Present:

Councillor Sirajul Islam	Cabinet Member for Housing Management & Performance
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Apologies:

Councillor Md. Maium Miah	– Scrutiny Lead for Resources
Councillor Oliur Rahman	

Others Present:

Supt Peter Turner	– Borough Superintendent
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Officers Present:

Mark Cairns	– Senior Strategy Policy & Performance Officer
Zena Cooke	– Corporate Director, Resources
Kevin Kewin	– Interim Service Head, Corporate Strategy & Equality
Kathryn Robinson	– Head of Legal Operations
Fiona Heyland	– Head of Waste Management
Trevor Kennett	– Head of Street Enforcement & Response
Andy Bamber	– Service Head, Community Service
Jackie Odunoye	– Head of Strategy, Regeneration & Sustainability
Charles Yankiah	– Senior Committee Officer

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Maium Miah and Councillor Oliur Rahman.

1.1 VOTE OF THANKS

The Chair, Councillor John Pierce on behalf of the Committee thanked Reverend James Olanipekun for his service, commitment and time given to the Committee and its functions through scrutiny reviews and challenge sessions.

Agreed that an official letter be written on behalf of the Committee, by the Chair, Councillor John Pierce to Rev. James Olanipekun expressing the Committee's gratitude.

2. DECLARATIONS OF DISCLOSABLE PECUNIARY INTEREST

There were no declarations of disclosable pecuniary interests.

3. UNRESTRICTED MINUTES

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

RESOLVED

That the unrestricted minutes of the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 1st February 2016 be approved and signed by the Chair as

a correct record of the proceedings subject to the following amendments being made: -

1. **Minutes from 4th January 2016** - Nozrul Mustafa enquired about the proposed amendments to the minutes of the 4th January meeting, which was raised at the previous meeting relating to the Co-opted Members being omitted from the attendance list on the minutes.

Agreed that the minutes of the 4th January 2016 be checked and confirmation be given at the next meeting regarding the amendments being made.

2. **Minute No. 7.3 – Recruiting more diverse school governors** - Dr Philip Rice requested that the following sentences be included in the minutes as part of the discussion held relating to the school governors,
 - a. “expressed a view that the feedback of the governors be sought as soon as possible over their perceptions of diversity”; and
 - b. “Over 92.5% of Headteachers are reported as being White British and the ethnic diversity of the governors is a prior problem, but the ethnic diversity of the Headteachers needs to be addressed as well.”

Agreed that the audio of the meeting held on 1st February 2016, be checked to confirm the points raised by Dr Philip Rice and the comments made by the representative of the Bangladeshi Governors and also to confirm the actions arising out of the item.

4. REQUESTS TO SUBMIT PETITIONS

Nil items.

5. UNRESTRICTED REPORTS 'CALLED IN'

Nil items.

6. SCRUTINY SPOTLIGHT

6.1 Crime and disorder spotlight (second) with Borough Commander and Safer Communities

The Committee received a briefing paper in relation to the ASB Operational Group that outlined details relating to the Operational Group, the Neighbourhood Priorities, current issues, the membership and the ASB product. Andy Bamber, (Service Head, Community Safety) informed the Committee that: -

- Community Safety and Police do not always agree and are always challenging each other, but share a good working relationship and want to see the issues in the Borough dealt with and resolved;
- Hoping to resolve the contractual issues and move forward with the Partnership Task Force as soon as possible;
- The previous administration made arrangements for 20 police officers to be contracted with 1 in each ward;
- Due to the change in administration discussions were held with the Mayor elect to seek clarity and direction relating to the previous arrangement and it was felt that only six police officers were needed; and
- Given these events, the police now wanted to take extra care to ensure that the terms of the Task Force were absolutely clear and finalised on both sides before moving forward.

Superintendent Peter Turner informed the Committee that: -

- The former Borough Commander left last Friday and the new Borough Commander Detective Superintendent Langworthy was now in post;
- ASB has reduced by 12.8% in comparison to last year
- Calls to the service are high, mainly because there is only 1 number to call #101;
- Repeat calls have been reduced by 15%;
- Over 1,000 ASB call have been received which averages over 30 a day and it is difficult to respond to all calls, so calls and workloads must be prioritised and investigated accordingly;
- The partnership approach has worked previously and will continue to work to improve the Borough;
- Meetings are held every 2 weeks and there is a small number of deployable resources;
- There are improvements that need to be made to provide feedback to the community; and
- There have been some issues with the contract and it has been going forwards and backwards from each legal department.

Trevor Kennett, (Head of Street Enforcement) informed the Committee that there were ASB hotspots in the Borough and that there was an agreement for additional support to deal with the issues and that the teams were making sure that all complaints were assessed and looked into within each cluster.

The Committee:

1. Congratulated the partnership working between the police and the community safety team and also thanked local police officers PC Perry and PC Cruickshank for the good work being done with the Licensing Committee;
2. Raised a number of outstanding ward issues with Superintendent Turner, Andy Bamber and Trevor Kennett;

3. Referred to electoral malpractice being reported by councillors to the police in the past and nothing being done;
4. Expressed concern in relation to feedback following ward-walkabouts not being fed back to councillors and issues in the Borough not being communicated to the local residents and councillors regularly; and
5. Informed Superintendent Turner, Andy Bamber and Trevor Kennett that local residents were frustrated and losing further confidence in the system and the police, mainly due to lack of communication after complaints have been made and ASB and drug dealing being reported.

Superintendent Peter Turner informed the Committee that in relation to –

- The specific ward issues that were raised, he would feed back to individual councillors any police matters and look at ways to improve communications in the future.
- Secondary Schools had a designated Police Officer in the school and dealt with issues in the schools.
- A number of issues are raised daily with the police relating to ASB, drug dealing, youths hanging around on street corners and causing annoyance and that the police are dealing with it through intelligence and investigations and issuing warrants and making arrests.

Andy Bamber also stated that the ward panels still exist and there is a link officer to deal with administration to ensure the ward panels are run effectively and looking at ways to improve communication with the councillors and the SNT and local residents.

Co-opted Members commented on the good partnership work that was currently taking place on the Collingwood Estate among the police, local residents, Tenants Associations and RSLs and that it should be duplicated elsewhere in the Borough. They also commented on the police in schools and that technology existed in every organisation which should make it easier to communicate feedback, updates and information.

The Committee agreed that: -

1. The Head of Street Enforcement would circulate the note from the ASB Operations Group to the Committee;
2. A briefing paper be submitted to a future meeting identifying ways to improve communication among the police, local residents, community safety and the councillors;
3. The MPS Officers responsible for investigating the electoral malpractice be invited to a future meeting;
4. The results of issues raised at ward walkabouts be circulated as requested by Councillor Hassell; and
5. Statistical data be provided to a future meeting that includes police engagement with primary schools.

The Chair, Councillor John Pierce thanked everyone for their contributions and for the officers attending.

7. UNRESTRICTED REPORTS FOR CONSIDERATION

7.1 Find it, Fix it, Love it (FIFLI)

The Committee received a report relating to Find it, Fix it, Love it (FIFILI) which highlighted the use of FIFILI, key links and the impact. Fiona Heyland (Head of Waste Management) highlighted the following: -

- The FIFILI app had an upgrade in 2015 which included road closure access and green cleaner services information;
- There has been an increase in staff reporting matters using the app;
- Peak times are usually between 10am – 2pm each day;
- Majority of the issues being logged refer to the cleansing services, fly tipping and dumping of rubbish;
- In 2014/15 there were more “find it and fix it” complaints and fewer “love it”, but in 2015/2016 there are more than 900 “love it”
- The app links directly to Veolia services who are then able to deal with issues directly or pass them onto waste management; and
- Future upgrades include quick response codes and an improvement to the app on the smartphone technology.

The Chair, Councillor John Pierce commented that the report originally presented to him at the “Chair’s Call Over” meeting was different and contained more information that he found useful.

The Committee:

1. Congratulated the team on the usefulness of the app and how well it worked;
2. Indicated that there needed to be more awareness raised regarding the app and its uses among councillors, staff and local residents;
3. Enquired about –
 - a. plans for the future
 - b. any statistics regarding the number of users
 - c. working with schools and young people offering a competition regarding improvements and logo etc
 - d. look at ways to improve its growth
 - e. linking the app with member enquiries
4. Expressed concern that the app should not be over complicated and should be kept simple.

Fiona Heyland informed the Committee that: -

- The fundamental part of the delivery of the app involves no additional cost and is not volume based, but just provides a different medium to report issues
- Services would be re-commissioning soon so there is an opportunity to look at all the issues raised and services being provided by the app.

- The app allows for written text and it is not just pictures.
- The app logs are treated as issues being raised to be dealt with and responded to fairly urgently; and
- If the issues remain unresolved and app users persistently raise the same issues, then these would be raised as a complaint.

The Committee agreed to note the report.

7.2 Welfare Reform Task Group Update

The Committee received a report in relation to the Welfare Reform Update that outlined details relating to the impact of the Welfare Reform in Tower Hamlets (TH), the key support measures currently in place, the future welfare reform changes and the Council's planned response.

Councillor Sirajul Islam, Deputy Mayor and Cabinet Member for Housing Management and Performance introduced the report and highlighted the following: -

- Government announced a number of welfare changes in their Emergency Budget and Autumn Statement;
- The existing changes are already having a significant impact on some residents in the borough and council and partner services;
- In 2014/15, 45,500 residents in TH were economically inactive of which 69% were women;
- In January 2016, 35,320 residents were in receipt of Housing Benefits of which 35% were in work;
- There are approximately 19,000 residents on the current housing waiting list in TH;
- The 2015/16 Discretionary Housing Payments Budgets was £2.7m; and
- The council has taken a cross council partnership approach to responding to welfare reform and this has been co-ordinated by the Welfare Reform Task Group.

Kevin Kewin (Interim Service Head, Corporate Strategy & Equality) presented the following information to the Committee in relation to the Welfare Reform in TH: -

- Implemented Reforms and Impact –
 - Benefit Cap – 501 households impacted, average weekly reduction of £72
 - Bedroom Tax – 2,100 households affected, average weekly loss £23
 - Local Housing Allowance (LHA) Cap – 1,878 LHA capped, average weekly shortfall of £42 (dependent on bedrooms)
 - Non Dependent Deductions – 4,495 households affected, average weekly reduction is £45

- Incapacity Benefit to Employment Support Allowance (ESA) – majority of recipients (around 12,000) have moved onto ESA
- Universal Credit – 1,368 claims to date, 50% 18-24 year olds
- The Council's response through the Welfare Reform Task Group includes information and advice, financial support, employment and skills support and prevention and resilience support;
- Proposed reforms –
 - Benefit Cap reduced to £23k
 - Minimum wage earners exempt from income tax
 - LHA cap applied to Housing Benefit in Social Sector
 - Reduced entitlement to housing benefit for 18-21 year olds
- Cumulative impact –
 - Reducing incomes
 - Increasing gap between housing costs and benefit payments
 - More residents need to seek employment
- Proposed responses –
 - Information and advice – communication, drop-in sessions across the Borough, targeted contact
 - Financial support – review of discretionary housing payments, council tax benefit scheme and crisis and support grants
 - Employment and skills support – raising aspirations employment project, expansion of DHP employment case managed support project
 - Prevention and resilience support – digital inclusion, financial inclusion, community mentor training and workshops
 - Strategic response – affordability commission, housing strategy, early years childcare review and refreshed employment and enterprise strategy

The Committee discussed the following:

- Why is the Crisis Support Grant underspent by £200k?
- Could something be done about childcare hours, it is currently being offered at 3 hours over 5 days, more needs to be done especially for single parents and there needs to be more flexibility for parents?
- What about de-classifying properties to assist with the bedroom tax issues?
- Changes to the LHA, how has this affected young people and those leaving care?
- Advice agencies need to be able to assist local residents who are having difficulties completing the DWP forms?
- What does it say in the Service Level Agreements about supporting residents?
- Is there an option to increase the number of times that local residents can apply for crisis loans from 3/4 times a year to maybe 5/6 times a year, as local residents are finding it difficult and experiencing hardship with all the bureaucracy?
- There is a lot of tough decisions to be made, so what is the timeline for these decisions and actions?

- Is TH monitoring the RSLs and the effect on local residents who may be in arrears and experiencing difficulties, is enough support being provided?
- Recently an RSL increased their parking charges by over 300%, how is this supporting local residents, there was no consultation at all?
- Many local residents are not getting the support when attend the Jobcentres either, they feel as though everything is a “tick box” exercise and staff are not concerned with their wellbeing?
- What’s happened to the Employment Strategy, has it been updated since 2011?
- There needs to be a unified response from the London Boroughs to the Government, is this being co-ordinated?
- Consideration needs to be given to the wellbeing of local residents in general and those with mental health issues and the support available to them?
- What about local residents on “0” hours contracts and their rent arrears?

Zena Cooke, Kevin Kewin and Jackie Odunoye responded to the questions asked by the Committee with the following information: -

- Engagement from some RSLs is good and there has not been any recent increase in evictions.
- De-classifying bedrooms has not significantly eased the bedroom tax for a number of reasons.
- Crisis and Support Grants was transferred from Government to Local Government in a relatively short space of time and there was an underspend in the first year. There is no guarantee at this stage for further funding for the next year so the underspend is all that is left and it is being monitored closely. TH is looking at creative ways to improve this service by working with supermarkets and furniture shops as well as looking at delivery options so that local residents are not identified as “seeking help” or being in a crisis situation.
- Also looking at a more collaborative approach with other Boroughs to find solutions for complex and challenging situations to support local residents who may not be earning enough to live comfortably.
- Part of the TH corporate parenting responsibility is to specifically look after the vulnerable young people including those in care and the care leavers.
- The Universal Credit benefit scheme pays in arrears and in a lump sum direct to a tenant. This is quite a risk as that person has to then manage that money. It is part of the Government’s philosophical approach to train parents to manage money and take responsibility.
- TH is part of a DWP Universal Credit pilot, which is very specific and narrow looking at the impact and targeting a small group of around 1300 people with the least complex cases.
- TH are working quite closely with Jobcentre Plus (JCP) as a statutory provider and meet monthly as part of a partnership agreement, this includes TH staff attending JCP briefing meetings.

Councillor Islam informed the Committee that the Cabinet met recently to discuss the welfare reform and officers will be bringing forward proposals for members' consideration.

The Committee agreed that: -

1. Information relating to Welfare Reform should be communicated more to councillors and could include the Members' Bulletin with a FAQs page.
2. RSLs and other Advice Agency SLAs should be checked to ensure that advice, signposting and supporting local residents to complete forms is included and it is being monitored appropriately.
3. Additional partnerships and joint working should be explored with other London Boroughs to ensure unified responses to the Government.
4. The Welfare Reform Update should be scheduled into the work programme for the Overview and Scrutiny Committee so that it is kept on the radar to be re-visited.

8. VERBAL UPDATES FROM SCRUTINY LEADS

The Committee noted the scrutiny update from Councillor Danny Hassell.

9. PRE-DECISION SCRUTINY OF UNRESTRICTED CABINET PAPERS

The Committee noted that Cabinet due to be held on 1st March 2016 had been cancelled and there were no reports for pre-decision scrutiny.

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

The Committee noted that there was no other unrestricted business that the Chair considered to be urgent.

11. EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

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.

12. EXEMPT/ CONFIDENTIAL MINUTES

Nil items.

13. EXEMPT/ CONFIDENTIAL REPORTS 'CALLED IN'

Nil items.

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

Nil items.

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

Nil items.

The meeting ended at 10.15 p.m.

Chair, Councillor John Pierce
Overview & Scrutiny Committee