

LONDON BOROUGH OF TOWER HAMLETS

MINUTES OF THE TOWER HAMLETS BEST VALUE IMPROVEMENT BOARD

HELD AT 6.05 P.M. ON MONDAY, 11 SEPTEMBER 2017

ROOM C1, 1ST FLOOR, TOWN HALL, MULBERRY PLACE, LONDON E14 2BG

Members Present:

Mayor John Biggs (Chair)	(Executive Mayor)
Sir Steve Bullock	(External Representative - THBVIB)
Councillor Amy Whitelock Gibbs	(Cabinet Member for Education and Children's Services)
Councillor Sirajul Islam	(Statutory Deputy Mayor and Cabinet Member for Housing)
Councillor David Edgar	(Cabinet Member for Resources)
Alan Finch	(Local Government Association)
Sharon Godman	(Divisional Director, Strategy, Policy and Partnerships)
Will Tuckley	(Chief Executive)

Other Councillors Present:

none

Officers Present:

Afazul Hoque	– (Acting Service Manager, Strategy, Policy & Performance)
Asmat Hussain	– (Corporate Director, Governance and Monitoring Officer)
Minesh Jani	– (Head of Audit and Risk Management, Resources)
Nancy Meehan	– (Interim Divisional Director, Children's Social Care)
Louise Stamp	– (Head of Electoral Services)
Antonella Burgio	– (Democratic Services)

WELCOME

Mayor Biggs welcomed Alan Finch who had been appointed to replace Heather Wills as Local Government Association representative on the Board. Noting that since the previous meeting Ms Wills had been seconded to another project, Mayor Biggs thanked her for her contribution to the Board's work and offered good wishes on behalf of the Board in her new role.

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Alan Wood and Councillor Clare Harrison Vice-Chair of Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

It was also noted that Debbie Jones, Corporate Director for Children's had submitted apologies and that Nancy Meehan, Interim Divisional Director Childrens Social Care attended the meeting as Children's Directorate representative.

2. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 14 June 2017 were approved as a correct record of proceedings.

3. DECLARATIONS OF DISCLOSABLE PECUNIARY INTERESTS

No declarations of disclosable pecuniary interests were made.

4. BEST VALUE IMPROVEMENT PLAN 2017-18 APRIL-JUNE 17 UPDATE

The Board heard from the Acting Service Manager, Strategy, Policy & Performance that:

- The progress update appendix 1 would be appended to the submission to be made to the Secretary of State in September 2017 together with comments from the Board.
- The update covered the five areas (communications, property, elections, organisational culture and grants) stipulated in the Directions of the Secretary of State for Local Government and Communities issued on 28 March 2017.
- 80% of the milestones in the action plan had been completed or were on target for completion.
- 14 % of these milestones were overdue or delayed. Each of these was monitored via a linked improvement plan.
- Appendix 1 outlined key achievements against each of the areas specified in the directions while appendix 2 indicated the status and levels of completion against each of the milestones of the action plan.

The following headlines were reported:

Communications -- a new communication strategy was launched in the quarter and related milestones were outlined at appendix 2. The communication plan had been widely publicised to enable corporate messages and priorities to be made known throughout the organisation.

Grants -- work was being undertaken to develop a new grants policy, commissioning framework and a voluntary sector compact. The actions of the original action plan related to grants awarded to the voluntary sector and community groups had been completed.

Property -- the first Community Hub was shortly to open and work underway on the development of other such hubs. An audit of organisation occupying Council buildings had also been completed.

Organisational Development - recruitment to senior posts was continuing. Revised core organisational values had been agreed and it was intended that these are embedded in the organisation. There had been a strategic partnership meeting and a programme for this body has been prepared. The 'clear up' project (instigated with the Commissioners to investigate historic members' code of conduct complaints) had concluded and reported to Council.

Elections - the board would receive a spotlight presentation at the meeting reporting in depth on progress against the action plan.

The Board discussed the progress reported and highlighted the following:

- Communications - concerning work that remained to be done to improve performance and promulgate council information in the community, the Board was informed that, previously, communications had often been delivered using old-fashioned styles and methods. This had been addressed by the creation of a better skilled team and better resourcing. Outputs from these actions were now beginning to be evidenced. A systematic approach to communications would be taken to achieve continuous improvement. To ensure that there was resilience; expertise and support have been resourced for members.
- Members' code of conduct and member to member behaviours – to establish a framework, an interim training package (to March 2018) was being established using a number of different methods of delivery, including providing training to members in their political groups and information sheets (e.g declarations of pecuniary interests) It was acknowledged that the challenge was to ensure that the engagement was effective. Additionally since the Corporate Director for Governance was only recently in post the desired progress had yet to be achieved in some areas.
- Elections –the Returning Officer had decided that the risks were too great for the borough to participate in the Cabinet office voter identification pilot scheme.
- There had been some delay in completing some of the milestones relating to the review and improved working of the Grants Determination Subcommittee; this was because that had been a review of the grants service. It, was intended, however, that this would be addressed by undertaking simultaneous action on policy development and operational issues. It was intended that the Grants Team would move towards a new structure following review. The Board reflected on the potential implications of delays on the action plan for this direction noting that:

- output at the operational end was well-managed but there had been lack of resources for engagement at Tower Hamlets CVS; this situation has since been resolved.
 - work on the new policy and approach was being delivered by the Strategy Policy and Performance Team
 - there was now a proper accounting structure, greater transparency in decision-making and accountability in the area of grant making.
 - the Council will present its arguments on progress and its expectations to DCLG and will highlight the scope of its achievements.
 - the three-year grant cycle now ending had established a regularised framework and priorities and the Council intended to move to better cycles, structures and commissioning so that priorities can better evolve and mirror development.
 - there had been concern at the DCLG around the revision of grant-making towards other arrangements however the structures established by Commissioners have been retained and are being further developed.
- In regard to Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) relating to the quarterly budget report (to be presented at Council in September 2017), the Board heard
 - that there had been a trend across budgets towards underspend. However it was expected that there would be a budgetary impact from the establishment of a Children Services Improvement Board (CSIB).
 - more rigorous reporting of the budgetary position has been introduced together with a better budgetary reporting framework and more budget scrutiny involving full discussions with the Executive..
 - Some milestones relating to the constitutional working group were overdue since the Corporate Director for Governance had only recently taken up her post. The Corporate Director confirmed that work was being undertaken on the Council's constitutional framework to make it more fit for purpose.

The Chair noted that no representatives from other political groups had attended the meeting.

RESOLVED

1. That the draft update report attached at appendix 1 be noted
2. That the milestones timescales in the attached at appendix to be noted
3. That the actions arising from the discussion of the report as set out in the minutes be taken forward

5. SPOTLIGHT - ELECTIONS

The Corporate Director for Governance and Head of Electoral Services gave a presentation outlining achievements, the electoral register and preparations for the forthcoming all councillor local elections.

The following information was noted:

- Population churn in the Borough is at 41%, however the electoral register has been kept up-to-date.
- The Council has received positive feedback on the delivery of all elections subsequent to the local election of 2014.
- Plans for the local elections in 2018 include:
 - Early engagement with the Electoral Commission.
 - Early messages to the community about the elections.
 - Early engagement with the Met. Police who are fully engaged in supporting arrangements for delivery of the elections. It was noted that Electoral Services has received excellent support from the Police to date.
 - Member / candidate briefings outlining what the candidates may expect.
 - Eight polling places under review (a report will be made to the Board in December 2017).
 - Some additional split polling stations according to size of polling districts and nature of the area.
 - The issue of folded ballot papers will be implemented to better manage the polling booths.
 - That the Count may take place at the East Winter Garden.
 - Counting will be delivered in two phases with a break between.
 - Two teams of counting staff will be allocated to Wards where the votes polled are close; the best counting teams will be called upon in this situation.
 - Feedback from senior count staff will be incorporated into the procedures.
- Where duplicate registrations have been detected, these have been checked individually by data matching; this has entailed much additional work. These registrations were very high during the General Election in 2017 and the causes are under investigation
- Cabinet Office Voter ID Pilot Scheme -- the Council would now not participate in this scheme for the following reasons:
 - the introduction of significant changes in election practices would have required long preparation and lead-time.
 - the submission to participate in the pilot was made contingent to there being enough time to deliver.
- Because of the time taken by the Cabinet Office to select the type of pilot and because of the snap election in June 2017, the Returning Officer assessed that the risks of undertaking the pilot were too high and there was an added risk of an election petition on grounds of change of electoral practice. Given the high profile of local elections in

the area it was judged that withdrawal from the pilot was prudent. The DCLG has received this decision and rationale with understanding. A Board Member observed that the biggest area of election risk concerned postal voting and this aspect was not part of the pilot. Concerning what measures the Council might implement to mitigate postal vote fraud the Board was informed that much work had been done on identifying and deleting duplicate registrations. Additionally:

- at the forthcoming election polling cards would be placed in envelopes and then mailed to voters.
- at the stations polling clerks would be required to ask voters delivering postal votes to identify themselves.
- the issue of voters attending a polling station with multiple polling cards would be resolved through poll clerk training.

Responding to questions from the Board the following information was provided:

- Exclusion zones around polling stations had been introduced to ensure that voters may freely access each polling station; the next election would be a rigorous test of the measure. Additionally areas where there had been previous problems during polling had been identified and would be monitored.
- Police and poll clerks would receive election training.
- A Police Officer would be posted to every Ward and remain on the Ward for the duration of the poll; these would also receive dedicated training.
- To mitigate incidents intended to subvert the new election structures, the presiding officer will regularly patrol the exterior of the polling station. There would also be outreach to the community to emphasise safeguarding in the practice of voting. This communication would cover all elements of the process from registration to poll.
- Budgeting management was an important element of the election process and generally elections had been run economically, notwithstanding the additional resources that had been required since 2015.

RESOLVED

That the presentation and discussion be noted.

6. CORPORATE IMPROVEMENT JOURNEY

The Acting Service Manager Strategy Policy and Performance presented the report which outlined progress made in the Council's corporate journey. The support of the Local Government Association in accomplishing achievements to date was acknowledged and the Board was asked to identify two areas for review using the performance digests set out at 3.13 of the report relating to the themes of customer services and organisational culture. The Council's aim was to achieve its plans for ongoing improvement and its aim of becoming an excellent modern Council.

The Board considered the report and *asked that information be provided* to understand how the culture shift will be effected in the context of the nature of the borough.

The Board noted:

- That presently the Council delivered its services in a traditional style and there was high dependency on Council services among elements of the population. This arises from the nature of the community and because hitherto large scale changes had not been attempted.
- That the Council was in the early stages in this aspect of its corporate journey and therefore it was intended that the discussion should aid focus.
- That preference for telephone communication in the borough had increased - it was suggested that the authority might explore how digital technologies can be purposefully used to deliver its desired outcomes.
- That residents continued to be dissatisfied with unanswered calls.
- That a challenge faced by the public was how it could navigate the Council's bureaucracy.
- That progress might involve profound change in practices.
- That the Council faced additional challenges in that it was seeking to make changes in the context of Government changes such as Universal Credit.
- That it was necessary to reflect whether the proposals are appropriate way forward for the organisation.
- That to achieve its aims it was necessary to have had inspired staff who believe in the direction of the Council. - Staff surveys indicated that staff felt very proud of their work but had often been sceptical about management and leadership of the Council. Hence it was necessary to instil and channel a corporate belief. To achieve this it was necessary to
 - build trust in leadership
 - have the HR policies that would reflect the type of organisation the Council wants to be
 - have staff that are developed
 - ensure that the Council has learned the lessons of the past – be learning organisation and also celebrate what we do well.
 - ensure that there are activities that maintain and lift staff morale (sickness rates were high).

The Board suggested

- That progress made by other councils in transforming their services be explored to assess whether such processes might be suitable to be adopted in the Tower Hamlets environment.
- That Lead Officers be invited to make presentations to the Board on how transformation might be taken forward.
- That the lessons learned from the recent Ofsted of children's social care should form part of the consideration.

RESOLVED

1. That the Council's improvement journey be noted and that the above discussion in relation to the improvement framework as set out in paragraph 3.11 be noted
2. That the discussion relating to new improvement areas for consideration as set out in paragraph 3.13 be noted and actions arising from this discussion be taken forward
3. That the actions requested by the Board be taken forward for the next meeting.

7. LGA CORPORATE PEER CHALLENGE PROPOSAL

The Board was asked to

- note that peer review was part of the process of earning disengagement from DCLG directions
- consider what would be the most appropriate timing and process to implement the peer challenge.
- note that the Council was required to undergo peer challenged by 1 August 2018 therefore it was necessary to ensure that there had been appropriate preparation for this element.

The Board indicated that, in its view, it would be appropriate to undertake the peer challenge the following the local government elections in June 2018.

RESOLVED

1. That the provisional date of review - June 2018 be endorsed
2. That the Council undertake thorough pre-review preparations for the peer challenge.

8. CHILDREN'S SERVICES IMPROVEMENT PLAN

The Board considered the report which set out progress relating to the four themes which would form part of the review framework that were established at the previous meeting. The plan indicated areas of concern as well as progress to date.

A summary of the initial feedback from Ofsted following their first visit was provided. The key assessment team found that there had been more progress than expected. In summary there had been progress at the client facing area of the children's social care services but this needed to be taken into the centre of the service and embedded in the workforce. It was also

noted that the intervention advisers had now been identified and were in place. The board was informed that a Direction was expected to be issued by the Department for Education. A letter from OFSTED was awaited that would address the areas of progress that were required.

RESOLVED

1. That the progress made in delivering the Children Services improvement program be noted
2. That it be noted that the next steps in the improvement journey will be updated in the next report

9. FORWARD PLAN

The Board considered the forward plan and noted that it would be reviewed in the light of the progress made by the Children Services Improvement Board.t

RESOLVED

That the contents of the forward plan be noted.

10. ANY OTHER URGENT BUSINESS

Nil items.

The meeting ended at 7.55 p.m.

Chair, Mayor John Biggs
Tower Hamlets Best Value Improvement Board