

<p>Non-Executive Report of the:</p> <p>Standards Advisory Committee</p> <p>Thursday, 30 July 2020</p>	 <p>TOWER HAMLETS</p>
<p>Report of: Asmat Hussain, Corporate Director, Governance and Monitoring Officer</p>	<p>Classification: Open (Unrestricted)</p>
<p>COVID-19 Pandemic Impact on Support for Members and potential future developments</p>	

Originating Officer(s)	Matthew Mannion, Head of Democratic Services
Wards affected	(All Wards);

Executive Summary

This report provides the Committee with an update on the impact of the pandemic on the support for Members (such as on Member Development and Member Surgeries) as well inviting a discussion on how the new ways of working could be embraced in future to provide more flexible services to Members.

In addition, for context, the report provides an update on related matters such as the impact on decision making and formal Council committees.

Recommendations:

The Standards Advisory Committee is recommended to:

1. Note the update on the Member Development, Member Surgeries and related areas.
2. Review and discuss the potential future options for taking advantage of new ways of working to support Members in future.

1. REASONS FOR THE DECISIONS

- 1.1 This noting report is presented to the Standards Advisory Committee to consider the impact and opportunities presented through the pandemic and new ways of working in supporting the work of Members. This relates to the Committee's role in relation to supporting the Members' Code of Conduct.

2. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

- 2.1 This is a noting report.

3. DETAILS OF THE REPORT

3.1 The current COVID-19 pandemic has had an impact on the work of Members and on the way support can be provided. Whilst there have been a number of initial negative impacts for example around holding committee meetings and needing to pause Member surgeries, some of the new ways of working demonstrate potential to offer more flexible support to Members in the future.

3.2 This report briefly sets out the current position and then requests views from the committee as to the best ways to continue to provide support and services to Members. These responses will be used as one of the sources of feedback used to help shape future services.

Initial Impact

3.3 When the initial pandemic lockdown occurred a number of processes and services were temporarily suspended including:

- Formal Committee meetings
- The work of the Speaker of the Council
- Member Learning and Development programme
- Member Surgeries
- Introduction of urgent Member enquiries process

3.4 The Democratic Services team moved to virtual support via email, telephone calls and now Teams.

Development of new arrangements

3.5 Democratic Services began work on planning new arrangements. The first focus was on formal decision-making processes. In consultation with the Corporate Leadership Team and General Purposes Committee it was agreed to temporarily pause formal decision making except where essential/urgent decisions were required. The Mayor and Cabinet were also updated as part of the wider 'LBTH Response to the Covid19 Pandemic' report presented to Cabinet on 3 June 2020.

3.6 The Constitution proved helpful in this regard as it already included scope for urgent decision making to take place where normal arrangements were not possible it included powers for the Chief Executive, for the Mayor in respect of Executive decisions and for General Purposes Committee for Non-Executive decisions.

3.7 Using these powers, the Mayor took a number of individual mayoral decisions in the March to May period. These were webcast to increase transparency and, where possible, Overview and Scrutiny Committee members were invited to submit comments as a substitute for the 'Pre-Decision Scrutiny Questions procedure that was usually used. Emergency powers for the Chief

Executive were not required. The General Purposes Committee made use of its powers at its regular June meeting (see below).

- 3.8 Attention then turned to re-starting regular Committee meetings, where decision making was required, as soon as possible. This was aided by emergency regulations introduced by the Government making provision for the conduct of meetings through any reasonable virtual means. The regulations also removed the requirement to hold an Annual Meeting in 2020 with all appointments to continue until an Annual Meeting was held (May 2021 at the latest) had provision to disapply any local Constitution or Procedure which may prohibit virtual meetings.
- 3.9 Following the provision of new ICT hardware and software in mid-April it became possible for the Council to use the MS Teams meeting software in conjunction with the Public-I webcasting software to broadcast Committee meetings. Following extensive testing, the first meeting held was a Licensing Sub-Committee in late April. The technology has been gradually rolled out to other Committees so that at this point only Council and two Cabinet sub-Committees have not yet met (note that one scrutiny sub-committee has been postponed for other reasons).
- 3.10 The Annual Meeting of Council was due to take place in May. It was agreed that this should be deferred with all committee arrangements continuing. The ordinary Council meeting set for July was also cancelled. The General Purposes Committee has met and considered a number of relevant reports, agreeing them under its emergency powers to act in place of Council in these circumstances. The reports they considered included:
- Agreement to waive the 6 month attendance rule for Councillors until the end of October 2020 to ensure no Members were disqualified during the pandemic for not being able to attend meetings.
 - Agreed an addendum to the Council's Procedure Rules specifically setting out procedures for the operation of virtual meetings.
 - Agreed the appointment of new Mayoral Advisors at the request of the Mayor.
- 3.11 The Member Development Programme was one of a number of services/programmes run by the Council which was temporarily suspended during the pandemic. This was partly due to the inability to hold physical events and the Council and Members immediate focus being the pandemic. The programme is now restarting. The first virtual Member Briefings have been held (see later in the report).
- 3.12 Member Surgeries were also curtailed due to the lockdown. Although supported by the Council, surgeries are operated by Members independently through various venues around the borough. There has been no decision to date on whether to reintroduce physical surgeries. Support was provided to put up notices and amend web pages giving alternative contact details.

- 3.13 Finally, the work of the Speaker was also put on hold. The main focus of the role is attendance at events to support the borough and also to raise the profile of, and funds for, their chosen charities. Government guidance is still that physical events should not take place where possible and the Speaker's participation remains restricted.

Technology

- 3.14 Before the pandemic hit, the Council had begun a process of upgrading the ICT hardware and software available to officers. This project has continued during the pandemic. As well as updating regular office software, the project has provided staff with new Windows 10 laptops which can connect to the network from any location. New software has also been provided with MS Teams being a particularly important new tool. This enables virtual meetings and catch-ups to take place whenever they are required and has transformed home working for many staff.
- 3.15 Due to the success of the new equipment, and to support the introduction of virtual committee meetings, the roll-out was extended to Members. This has been extremely beneficial in helping Member access to committee meetings, especially and generally it makes it much easier to provide support and design services where Members are using the same equipment. At this point almost all Members now have receiving the equipment or have an appointment booked.

Developing Services – Positive changes for the future

- 3.16 Whilst the Pandemic continues to impact on service provision, this is an opportunity to consider how to remobilise support for Members and make changes to the offer where beneficial based on the new technology available.

Committee meetings – virtual, hybrid, physical

- 3.17 Regulations to allow virtual (or hybrid) meetings run until May 2021 depending on any changes to that, virtual and/or hybrid meetings may continue to be offered where appropriate however it would be expected that the Council's main meeting types (Cabinet, Council, planning/licensing) would generally revert to physical meetings when possible. In the interim the Council is also continuing to monitor updated guidance from the government and across the sector on the safety of hybrid/physical meetings and whether they would meet with the government's social distancing regulations. Risk assessments would have to be signed off before these meetings could take place.

Member Learning and Development Programme

- 3.18 Member Information Briefing sessions have recently restarted with virtual sessions held on the Council's Summer Holiday Food and Activity programme and also on the 'Keep Tower Hamlets Safe – Tower Hamlets COVID-19 Local Outbreak Plan'. Feedback from the initial sessions has been positive with a number of comments from Members who prefer virtual sessions as they are

easier to attend. Initial indicators to appear to show higher attendance levels and colleagues from other London Boroughs are also reporting increased attendance at similar sessions.

- 3.19 For the main Member Learning and Development Programme, the first virtual training session on Ethics and Probity is to take place soon. This is being run as an online seminar with participation opportunity (including question and answer session and scenarios).
- 3.20 Virtual training sessions may allow for recordings to take place and to be placed on the Members Hub to allow more accessibility for Members.
- 3.21 Whilst virtual Member Information Briefings appear to be the likely way forward, for Learning and Development Sessions a variety of options may be used depending on the style of training being required. However, virtual sessions do offer more flexibility both for Members and trainers and may also reduce costs.

Member Surgeries

- 3.22 Current COVID-19 regulations do allow meetings to take place indoors where necessary but also state that this should only happen where no other solutions are available. In addition, any venue for Member surgeries would require a COVID-19 risk assessment including around cleaning and sanitation. Further challenges would also have to be addressed, for example around limits to number of households meeting in the same indoor location, issues around shielding and more. For these reasons physical surgeries remain difficult to arrange.
- 3.23 Government guidance is continually being reviewed and consultation with the political groups will need to take place on the future arrangements of member surgeries. Opportunities are now being presented to make use of technology to include virtual surgeries as an option to increase accessibility and flexibility for residents and Members.

Speaker Duties

- 3.24 Restrictions on the role of the Speaker are likely for a while yet due to social distancing guidelines. Further opportunities to move to virtual events and social media communications will need to be explored.

General Support to Members

- 3.25 All of the above will take place in an environment where all Council services, including those involving Members, are may need to be reviewed to take account of the new technology being developed, the need to manage the impact of the pandemic and also the ongoing financial challenges at the Council.

4. EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 None specific to this report. However equalities implications will need to be considered in terms of the individual projects and services mentioned. For example, the need to take account of protecting vulnerable people should the Council move to holding physical meetings or events.

5. OTHER STATUTORY IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 This section of the report is used to highlight further specific statutory implications that are either not covered in the main body of the report or are required to be highlighted to ensure decision makers give them proper consideration. Examples of other implications may be:
- Best Value Implications,
 - Consultations,
 - Environmental (including air quality),
 - Risk Management,
 - Crime Reduction,
 - Safeguarding.
 - Data Protection / Privacy Impact Assessment.

- 5.2 None specific to this report.

6. COMMENTS OF THE CHIEF FINANCE OFFICER

- 6.1 This report recommends that the Standards Advisory Committee note the update and review potential future options for support for Member Development, Member Surgeries and related areas. There are no direct financial implications arising from this report.

7. COMMENTS OF LEGAL SERVICES

- 7.1 There are no specific legal implications arising from the contents of this report.
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Linked Reports, Appendices and Background Documents

Linked Report

- None.

Appendices

- None.

Local Government Act, 1972 Section 100D (As amended)

List of “Background Papers” used in the preparation of this report

List any background documents not already in the public domain including officer contact information.

- None.

Officer contact details for documents:
N/A