

Responses to Member Questions 30th September 2020 Council Meeting

Question from Councillor Leema Qureshi

Can the cabinet member please provide an update on Test and Trace in the borough?

Response from Deputy Mayor for Adults, Health and Wellbeing, Cllr Rachel Blake:

Like many areas some residents in Tower Hamlets have faced major challenges getting access to vital Covid-19 tests as a result of the national shortfall in testing capacity. We know how important these tests are to allowing residents to go about their daily life and we are committed to supporting residents to access a test if they have covid-19 symptoms.

Over recent weeks the Mayor and I have lobbied Government for additional resources for test and trace to ensure it is working effectively and to end the unacceptable delays our residents have faced.

As a result, the Department of Health and Social Care recently opened a test centre in the borough at Watney Market Idea Store and we expect another to open in Mile End very shortly. While this is positive, we still need to see an urgent increase in testing capacity in London and across the country.

The council is offering additional support to complement the national service by establishing a local team to contact covid-positive residents which NHS Test and Trace have struggled to reach. Local social prescribers, advocates and interpreters will contact cases to check they are self-isolating, and signpost them to any relevant services that can support them and their households to isolate.

Question from Councillor Peter Golds

Having cancelled Oktoberfest in Millwall Park this year due to the damage caused last year to the grass playing surface, will the Mayor confirm that following the evidence of violence, disorder and anti social behaviour at last years event from the Met Police,, he will not be hiring out Millwall Park to Oktoberfest in future years?

Response from Cabinet Member for Culture, Arts and Brexit, Cllr Sabina Akhtar:

This council takes residents' concerns seriously which is why the recent licence review of this event resulted in a number of new conditions being imposed on the Oktoberfest that were designed to mitigate the issues of previous events.

These included a cap on number of people attending at 1,500, a condition CCTV must be in place and that no alcohol can be taken off the licenced area.

The organiser has indicated that they are able to adhere to these new conditions and may consider submitting a new format event to the council which we would consider like any other event. Given the current uncertainty around large scale events and the many unknown factors caused by the pandemic this clearly is unlikely to happen for some time.

If there was such an event a decision around its licensing would be taken, as you know, by the Council's Licencing Committee looking at the evidence in a quasi-

judicial capacity rather than by the Cabinet, however given the problems we have experienced previously, in my opinion it's difficult to see how a similar event would be welcomed without stringent measures in place to improve behaviour.

Question from Councillor Dipa Das

Could the cabinet member update members on the recently launched Tower Hamlets Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Inequalities Commission?

Response from Deputy Mayor for Community Safety, Youth and Equalities, Cllr Asma Begum:

Tower Hamlets' Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Inequalities Commission was successfully launched on 16th September. The commission will focus on areas of inequality faced by our Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic residents.

Tower Hamlets is a diverse borough with a proud history of fighting racism and fascism as well as our continued commitment to diversity. However, recent events have once again shined a spotlight on racial inequality.

The Commission will engage and operate at the heart of Tower Hamlets' communities to hear people's lived experience and solutions, specifically Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic women and young people who experience higher levels of inequality, work with institutions to advance and prioritise race equality and influence local, sub-regional and regional leaders.

This Commission has appointed a panel of expert commissioners from various institutions to lead the engagement and evidence gathering.

The three priority areas of focus are Community Leadership, Health and, Employment & Education with a report due to be published in early 2021 with clear and tangible actions we can all collectively take to address the inequality our communities face.

Question from Councillor Andrew Wood

What future (if any) do St Georges and Tiller road leisure centres have?

Response from Cabinet Member for Culture, Arts and Brexit, Cllr Sabina Akhtar:

Thank you for your question Cllr Wood, I understand that similar questions were also submitted by Cllr Jones and Cllr Ullah with reference to St George's leisure centre as I know this is a matter of real importance to our residents.

We know that our leisure centres are an important service for residents. That is why on 29th July Cabinet made the decision to provide £774,000 in financial assistance to cover the leisure centre costs incurred during lockdown and permit a phased opening of the borough's leisure centres.

This phased opening was designed to maximise the leisure offer to local residents, whilst ensuring that the centres could be operated in a safe, Covid-secure manner and were financially viable once opened with reduced usage and income generation due to social distancing and other Covid-19 management measures.

The funding provided by Cabinet meant that Mile End, Poplar Baths, York Hall and John Orwell leisure centres were able to once again open their doors in a Covid-secure manner.

Unfortunately, St. George's and Tiller Leisure Centres cannot currently be operated in a Covid-secure, financially viable manner due to their configuration and significant operational subsidy required. The layout of the gyms and studio areas makes the implementation of 2m social distancing extremely problematic. In addition, both centres were operating at a considerable subsidy before lockdown, which would increase significantly given the reduction in customers due to Covid-19 social distancing.

We should also be clear that the delayed reopening of these centres is temporary, and no decision has yet been regarding their longer-term future.

Leisure centre operations during the pandemic are being regularly monitored and are under constant review to enable the Council and GLL to adapt to changing circumstances, including the potential impact of a second wave with further social restrictions, which are currently being implemented. We lobbied government to step in and help and I attach a letter to the Prime Minister and the reply we recently received.

A full review of our leisure offer and the ongoing impact of Covid-19 will be carried out ahead of the wider leisure contract retendering due in the coming years.

Question from Councillor Val Whitehead

What support has been made available to vulnerable residents throughout the Covid-19 pandemic?

Response from Deputy Mayor for Adults, Health and Wellbeing, Cllr Rachel Blake:

The council has worked proactively in partnership with the NHS and other partners, services across the borough, and of course with local people, community and faith groups, to ensure that vulnerable residents have been supported during the pandemic. This vital work will continue and we are constantly reviewing and assessing our approach to ensure that residents receive the support they need.

Our response to Covid-19 covers a large number of areas, but some key ways we have supported vulnerable residents include:

- We continue to work closely with our care home and domiciliary care providers to ensure that access to guidance, information and training on infection control has been in place. Our care homes have had 'wrap around' support from NHS colleagues including GPs, hospital clinicians, mental health professionals and pharmacists to ensure that residents are getting the health care support they need; and carers within those services have had additional wellbeing support provided.
- We established a 'mutual aid' scheme for PPE (personal protective equipment) – supplying PPE to all carers who needed this within care homes, domiciliary care agencies, those shielding and those who purchase care through a direct payment or personal health budget. This also included advice and training on the correct use of PPE.
- The pandemic has exposed existing health inequalities. We have worked with partners to better understand the disproportionate impact of Covid-19

on Black, Asian and Minority communities, and we have lobbied the Government to take this more seriously. We have worked directly in partnership with community groups to reach the whole community to provide support and advice

- For residents in the borough who have a direct payment, we put in place a 10% contingency budget to support them. We are providing advice and support across the board working closely with our local disabled people's organisation, the local provider of direct payment support and others.
- For those residents who accessed support through our day centres or Linkage Plus centres, we re-focused the way that support was provided through use of doorstep visits and technology. Where needed, we adjusted packages of care to ensure needs were met.
- Over 7,200 people were contacted by a team of council, NHS and voluntary sector staff because they were extremely vulnerable and shielding. We provided food, medication, advice and social support when needed, with the support of volunteers and community organisations
- For residents being discharged from hospital, we worked with colleagues in the NHS to develop an 'integrated discharge hub' to ensure timely and smooth discharge, and we provided a number of extra interim placements for people who could not immediately return to their home or care home.
- We have worked with partners to better understand the disproportionate impact of Covid-19 on BAME people, and we have lobbied the Government to take this more seriously.
- We continue to offer advice and support to residents on low incomes through our Tackling Poverty measures and our 100% Council Tax Reduction Scheme.
- We continue to lobby the Government for the funding that local authorities need to respond to the virus.

Throughout the pandemic, the community spirit in Tower Hamlets has really shone through, with residents and community groups working tirelessly to support one another. We will continue to support that effort, which will be more important than ever over the next few months as the number of cases rise and as we enter into the winter period in what will be an extremely challenging time for the country and for the borough.

Question from Councillor Rajib Ahmed

What is the council's best estimate of the economic impact of Covid-19 on the borough, both in terms of the impact on the council's finances and the local economy generally?

Response from Cabinet Member for Work and Economic Growth, Cllr Motin Uz-Zaman:

As is the case across the whole country, the impact of the pandemic in Tower Hamlets has been significant.

The latest ONS data shows that on 31st July there were 47,600 Tower Hamlets residents receiving support through the government's furlough scheme which is equivalent to 29% of eligible residents. In addition, at the end of August there were 9,100 residents claiming self-employment support, which is 62% of those eligible.

The number of residents receiving of out of work benefits increased from 8,010 in January to 20,325 in August.

As the furlough scheme is withdrawn at the end of October and replaced by less generous employment support package announced by the chancellor last week, one of our concerns is the potential for a significant increase in unemployment, particularly as further restrictions have been implemented for the hospitality sector.

From the council's perspective, we have distributed government-allocated grants to 5,240 local business, worth a total value of over £76m. The council also distributed an additional £3m of discretionary funding to small businesses, including market traders, which missed out on the funding from central government mentioned above.

Work is still on-going to establish the precise impact of the pandemic on the council's finances, but clearly the impact has been severe as spending has increased and our income declined. Disappointingly, the government hasn't committed to reimbursing councils for all pandemic-related spending despite initial promises.

Question from Councillor Gabriela Salva Macallan

Will the Mayor reconsider the implementation of the Tower Rewards scheme in light of the strength of opposition from residents, workers and UNISON, as well as the growing national concern around the use of Section 188?

Response from Mayor John Biggs:

The Tower Rewards package invests roughly £2.3 million more in pay and conditions.

The package increased pay and annual leave for many staff, introduced a new rent deposit scheme and standardised overtime and on call pay to ensure fairness. It updated special leave provisions, including to increase bereavement leave to up to 5 days and introduced new categories including for victims of domestic abuse.

The pay increases invested in roles which had fallen behind market median, including 'hard to fill' posts, like social workers. For example, the new pay scales mean a pay increase of £2,358 for an entry grade PO1 social worker.

Since January 2019 there has been regular engagement with unions, and directly with staff, to ensure that the views of our workforce are heard and responded to with over 1,000 staff engaged through email, face to face briefings and open Q&A sessions.

The feedback we received allowed management to make a wide range of amendments to the package at multiple stages in the process in response to concerns. For example, initial proposals on flexitime, working hours, redundancy notice, pay protection and progression were all withdrawn or significantly amended following feedback.

Alongside this, anyone adversely affected by any element of the changes will see their pay protected for two years or until increments in pay rises mitigate any loss and those already in restructures approved by CLT before the introduction will continue to benefit from the previous severance scheme.

It is important to recognise that over by July 1,400 staff had proactively opted into the contracts before they were implemented. This far exceeded the 656 Unison members who voted for strike action. I appreciate there remain some areas of concern and I remain disappointed that a collective agreement was not possible. Last week I once again wrote to Unison to offer to meet to discuss how we could address their remaining concerns about the implementation of the changes.

Withdrawing the contract is not however an option as it would mean another protracted process and would result in pay cuts, reductions in annual leave and other new benefits, which I am sure nobody wants to see.

Question from Councillor Marc Francis

Will the Lead Member for Public Realm Services provide an update on the Mayor's review of the Car Free Zone policy, including dates of the working group's meetings in the past 12 months and an indication when proposals for reform are likely to be brought forward?

Response from Cabinet Member for Environment and Public Realm (job share), Cllr Dan Tomlinson:

Thank you for your question. There is not a specific working group on Car Free Zones or Car Free Developments. We keep all our parking policies under review and on this specific policy I expect that we will look at it again next year and I'd be happy to keep you informed on this.

Question from Councillor Kahar Chowdhury

What support has been provided to homeless individuals and families since the beginning of the pandemic and how many have received this support?

Response from Deputy Mayor for Housing, Cllr Sirajul Islam:

The council took significant steps to support homeless families and those sleeping rough and protect them from the threat of the pandemic.

During the height of the first lockdown until the end of July, 153 complex needs rough sleepers had been accommodated by the Council directly from the street into commercial hotels.

To enable practicing of social distancing and self-isolation as required, 111 single people who have been at risk of rough sleeping or who were claiming to be rough sleeping have also been accommodated by the Council in B&Bs and other temporary accommodation during Covid-19. These individuals have no priority need which means the Council owes them no housing duty and would not normally have accommodated them. As of August, a further 49 individuals had been accommodated who had no recourse to public funds.

The Council is committed to an the 'in-for-good' principle to ensure individuals taken in during Covid move-on in a planned co-ordinated way without the need to return to the streets. Rough sleepers are being supported to access suitable supported accommodation, or medium-term homes in the private rented sector for those with lower needs. The Council is also ensuring individuals with 'no recourse to public funds' have an offer of support.

Question from Councillor Kyrsten Perry

How many 'school streets' have been launched and what are the next steps?

Response from Cabinet Member for Environment and Public Realm (job share), Cllr Dan Tomlinson:

Six School Street schemes are in the process of being launched in Tower Hamlets. These include:

- Ben Jonson Primary and Harry Roberts Nursery, Stepney Green – closed to motor vehicles (except residents) at drop-off and pick-up times.
- Blue Gate Fields Junior, Shadwell – new zebra crossing.
- Elizabeth Selby Infants and Lawdale Junior, Bethnal Green – Old Bethnal Green road closure to reduce through-traffic, traffic calming in Pollard Street to follow.
- English Martyrs Primary, Whitechapel – improved pavements, one-way system and pedestrian and cycle zone at drop-off and pick-up times.
- Globe Town Primary, Bethnal Green - closed to motor vehicles (except residents) at drop-off and pick-up times.
- Malmesbury Primary, Bow - closed to motor vehicles (except residents) at drop-off and pick-up times.

Five more schemes are now being taken into the implementation stage after already completing public consultation as part of other projects. Public consultation is being planned on a further 7 School Street Projects for October/November

Question from Councillor Rabina Khan

Tower Hamlets Children missed out on school for almost 5 months during Covid-19 lockdown and many could not access education online, unable to study at home due to cramped conditions and did not get the right support. Is the Mayor preparing a strategy to ensure that children educationally disadvantaged by the lockdown do not fall even further behind in their education and are given the support they need to fulfil their potential?

Response from Cabinet Member for Children and Schools, Cllr Danny Hassell:

We believe in giving Every Chance for Every Child and recognise the risk of our most vulnerable children falling behind under the exceptional circumstances of the pandemic.

In addition to the work of schools, within the council this concern was reflected in the establishment of Bronze level groups on socially vulnerable children, medically vulnerable children and on mental health.

The work in schools continues to be led and delivered through the Tower Hamlets Education Partnership whose staff are working closely with school leaders and practitioners to support pupil learning and to continue to narrow the gap.

This work has included supporting schools in delivering home learning strategies and enabling more children to have access to IT; supporting schools in responding to any gaps they have identified and constructing the curriculum to meet those gaps; schools are proactively taking steps to support pupils to catch up on missed lessons, as well as a focus on activity to promote physical and wellbeing.

The government has promised schools catch up funding, but this has not been distributed yet – once it is, THEP will support schools in maximising the impact of this additional resource and we'll work with teachers to ensure our children deliver their full potential.

Question from Councillor Harun Miah

In recent months, the rough sleepers in our borough are increasing in an alarm rate, particularly in and around Shadwell Overground and DLR.

Can the cabinet member tell us what is been done to eradicate this menace?

Response from Deputy Mayor for Housing, Cllr Sirajul Islam:

This administration does not see rough sleepers as a 'menace to be eradicated'. We understand that for many individuals, rough sleeping is a sign of people in crisis and in need of support.

At the beginning of the Covid 19 lockdown the number of people found rough sleeping increased across the capital. This was for a number of reasons including people suddenly losing their jobs, sudden evictions and family or friends no longer able to support them.

Our Rough Sleeping Team along with our commissioned Street Outreach Response Team have continued to work throughout the pandemic conducting outreach shifts, assessing new referrals, completing welfare checks, identifying support needs, and securing a pathway off the street for those found rough sleeping.

Not all individuals accept the offer of support and accommodation for various reasons including substance misuse issue, difficulty in trusting people due to past trauma and/or poor mental health. Our outreach team continue to work with these clients and encourage them to accept the support available.

Rough sleeping is not a crime and no one can be forced to accept accommodation however where anti-social behaviour (ASB) is identified alongside the rough sleeping, evidence is gathered and enforcement action are taken by the council and the police to reduce the ASB and encourage clients to accept support.

Shadwell DLR, Shadwell Overground station and the surrounding area has been identified as a hotspot and a number of actions have been taken. The location has been discussed at the Shadwell Ward Panel meeting and identified as one of the top three priorities for the local Safer Neighbourhood Team. The council's Rough Sleeping team and Street Outreach Response Team continue to work with the local Police Teams, British Transport Police, Tower Hamlets Enforcement Officers (THEOS) and the local social housing teams around the Shadwell hotspot and individuals - obtaining evidence of the ASB and taking enforcement action where appropriate. Alongside the enforcement action clients are always offered and encouraged to accept support.