

Overview and Scrutiny Annual Report

**London Borough of Tower Hamlets
May 2006**



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Overview and Scrutiny in Tower Hamlets

Overview and Scrutiny looks at how the Council and its partners deliver services so that they meet local needs and contribute to the overall vision in the borough's Community Plan. It also monitors the decisions made by the Council's Cabinet to make sure that they are robust and provide good value for money.

Overview and Scrutiny also has powers to review and scrutinise local health services and make recommendations to NHS bodies. It can also consider other issues of concern to local people, including services provided by other organisations. It then advises the Cabinet, Council and sometimes other partners, on how their policies and services can be improved.

Membership

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee coordinates all Overview and Scrutiny work. It has eight councillors reflecting the overall political balance of the Council during 2004/05. There are five Labour councillors, two Liberal Democrat councillors and one Conservative councillor.

As well as the councillors, there are five other people who sit on the Committee. They have specific responsibilities for education. There are two representatives appointed by the Anglican and Roman Catholic Dioceses. There are also two parent governors. Each of these representatives can contribute to any matters discussed by the Committee but they can only vote on education issues. The final member is a non-voting representative of the Muslim community for education issues. The decision to have this position was a local one in recognition of the large Muslim community in the borough.

Scrutiny Chair and Leads

The Chair of the Committee in 2005/06 was Councillor Alan Amos. The Chair oversees the work programme of the committee as well as taking a lead on monitoring the Council's budget.

There are six 'scrutiny leads': one for each of the themes in the Tower Hamlets Community Plan, with a further lead on health issues. The Scrutiny Leads were:

- Cllr Julian Sharpe (Labour) for "creating and sharing prosperity" focusing on bringing investment into the borough and ensuring residents and businesses benefit from growing economic prosperity
- Cllr Louise Alexander (Liberal Democrat) for "learning, achievement and leisure" focusing on raising educational aspirations, expectations and achievement, providing a wide range of arts and leisure, and celebrating the diversity of the community
- Cllr Marian Williams (Liberal Democrat) for "excellent public services" focusing on improving public services to make sure they represent good value for money and meet local needs
- Cllr Julia Mainwaring (Labour) for "health" focusing on improving local health services and the co-ordination of different health service providers within the borough
- Cllr Abdul Aziz Sardar (Labour) for "living safely" focusing on reducing crime, making people feel safer and creating a more secure and cleaner environment
- Cllr Salim Ullah (Labour) for "living well" focusing on improving housing and social care

The Scrutiny Leads actively promote the work of Overview and Scrutiny with residents, partners and other stakeholders. They also pick up any relevant issues on behalf of the Committee as a whole and led the working groups within their theme.

What does Overview and Scrutiny do?

The Committee:

- looks at how the Council is performing by monitoring key strategies and plans
- looks at the Council's budget and how it uses its resources
- sets up time-limited working groups to look at issues in depth and make proposals for change. Suggestions for topics may come from elected Members, full Council, the Cabinet or from local organisations and residents.
- considers decisions made by the Cabinet that are 'called in'. This happens if there is concern about the decision or what information was considered
- reviews briefly the reports that are going to Cabinet for decision and raises any concerns.

Because the Committee has such a broad responsibility, it focuses on a number of key priorities each year. These make up an annual work programme for each of the Scrutiny Leads. For each area there is usually one in-depth review, as well as a number of shorter pieces of work.

Health Scrutiny

The Government has given local councils specific responsibilities to scrutinise health services. The Health Scrutiny Panel was set up to do this and can look at any matter about health services within the borough including hospital and GP services, health promotion and prevention. This includes the way that health services are planned, how services are provided and how NHS organisations consult with local people.

Under the Healthcare Commission's new Annual Healthcheck for all NHS trusts, the Health Scrutiny Panel can comment on local Trust's declarations against 24 Core Standards. These cover seven areas: safety, clinical and cost effectiveness, governance, patient focus, accessible and responsive care, care environment and amenities and public health. There is also a duty on local health services to consult with the Health Scrutiny Panel if they are making substantial changes to services.

Annual Report

This report provides a brief summary of the work of Overview and Scrutiny in 2005/06. Each member of the Committee outlines the work that they have undertaken both in the reviews that they have led and also their work on the Committee.

Overview and Scrutiny Committee Chair Councillor Alan Amos

This is the second year since we changed our arrangements for Overview and Scrutiny in Tower Hamlets. Our arrangements include:

- a single co-ordinating Overview and Scrutiny Committee
- five Scrutiny Leads scrutinising the Community Plan themes and one for Health matters
- pre-decision scrutiny of Cabinet reports
- performance monitoring by considering the Tower Hamlets Index, Strategic Plan and Equalities Action Plan.
- a more robust call-in procedure

We agreed a challenging work programme in July 2005. Despite the Scrutiny year being slightly shorter because of the local elections, I believe we have delivered on the majority of it. Over the year, we monitored our progress to make sure we remained on track to complete our work.

Performance Monitoring

We monitor the Tower Hamlets Index (THI) every two months and twice a year the Council's Strategic Plan and Equalities Action Plan. As we are the only formal councillor forum that does this, we take this role seriously. We believe this worked effectively and helped Overview and Scrutiny understand and comment on the wider performance of services: a key part of improving the quality of life of local people. Next year we plan to strengthen our performance management by tracking the action taken to address Members' comments and concerns.

We also introduced a new session at Committee: the Scrutiny Spotlight. All directorates and lead Members attended to discuss the performance and main challenges facing their services. This included a discussion with the Leader and Chief Executive at the December meeting around the Strategic Plan and the challenges ahead for the Council and borough. This prompted considerable discussion, debate and questions from Committee Members. Although this worked reasonably well, I hope we can improve the discussion and debate among councillors, rather than with officers, next year.

We also considered the Council's annual Corporate Complaints report and noted the progress in the handling of complaints. We agreed to monitor this every six months as we felt it was a critical issue and could usefully inform the Scrutiny work programme.

We also received an update on the new Members' Enquiries system. All councillors were pleased to see the improved performance in responding to Members' enquiries. I feel that this is an important aspect of representing constituents and timely responses are essential to the work of councillors. We will receive an update every six months on the system and will be monitoring it closely.

Policy Framework

Within the Council's Policy and Budget Framework there are a number of key policy documents that set out how the Council will act. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee consider these before Council agrees them. We discussed the following Policy documents this year:

- **Tower Hamlets and City of London Youth Justice Plan 2005/06**
The Committee supported the Plan and noted the many improvements made and the more robust monitoring and evaluation. We acknowledged the work done with parents, but felt that this needed to be given greater emphasis, as it was an essential part of our strategies to reduce offending and anti-social behaviour by young people.
- **Lifelong Learning Service Three Year Development Plan 2005-2008**
We welcomed the Plan and particularly the Education Directorate's positive proposals to address the low take up of the service by Bangladeshi residents and by men. The Committee also welcomed the proposals to improve the low skills base of the majority of the adult population of the borough so that we can all contribute to and share in the improving local economy.
- **Food Law Enforcement Plan**
We noted the step improvements in the service and supported the action to recruit local people as one of the ways of tackling the difficulty of recruiting Environmental Health officers nationwide.

Scrutiny of the Budget

We considered the Council's budget at four of our meetings this year.

In August we noted the substantially different financial climate that the Council was now moving into, with much greater pressure on resources, despite the significant service challenges ahead. The Committee discussed and supported the Council's approach of planning on the basis of existing resources and seeking efficiency savings to manage budgetary pressures. The Committee noted that the Council's budget setting processes and management were felt to be robust and effective by the Audit Commission.

In October, we considered the interim budget report and were particularly concerned at the Government's proposals on Grant Distribution and the negative impact this would have on the borough's overall support from Government.

In January and February, we discussed the Revenue Budget for 2006/07. We welcomed the improved final settlement figures for the borough but noted the significant charge on local people by the Mayor of London to pay for the Olympic Games. In its budget, we sought assurance that the Council would use resources to increase recycling services for local people rather than pay Landfill Tax, wherever possible. Cabinet reassured us that they would do this.

Pre-decision scrutiny

We can submit issues of concern to Cabinet before it takes a decision. I feel we have strengthened this over the year and commented on 23 Cabinet reports. This included the reports on:

- Regeneration Strategy
- Rich Mix Cultural Centre (on 2 occasions)
- Waste Collection and Street Collection Contract (on 2 occasions)
- OFSTED Inspection Report of Youth and Community Services
- Revised Alternative Dispute Resolution Scheme
- Local Development Framework
- Open Space Strategy

Although our questions and concerns have not changed a Cabinet decision, they have provided further information and clarified the reasons for the decisions. More generally, pre-decision scrutiny has encouraged and prompted debate in Cabinet on the reports. This has been a really positive step in the role of Overview and Scrutiny and has made the Committee much more proactive in its work.

Call-in

The Committee has considered eight call-ins this year. This is an increase from the four in 2004/05. The Call-ins considered by the Committee were:

- Rich Mix Cultural Centre (two reports in Part Two business)
- Waste collection and street cleansing contract 2005-2017 - Selection of Preferred Bidder (Part Two business)
- Watney Market Underground Car Park Lease To Royal London Hospital
- Revised Alternative Dispute Resolution Scheme
- Development Brief on Furze Street
- Open Space Strategy
- Disposal of Bow Lock (Part Two business)

The debate and discussion on call-ins was robust and rigorous at Overview and Scrutiny Committee. We confirmed one decision (Watney Market Underground Car Park) with the Cabinet member agreeing to look at maintenance and consider further improvements. We asked Cabinet to reconsider the other seven. Although Cabinet reconfirmed its decision on all the call-ins, they took account of our comments. For example, on the Alternative Dispute Resolution Scheme, they agreed to provide a plain English version of the scheme and clarified a number of issues including withholding of service charges, to keep the scheme under review and that Members should agree any significant policy changes. In January, Cabinet accepted some of the comments of the Committee on the Open Spaces Strategy and incorporated them into the Action Plan. This included those around maintenance of horticultural standards and the importance of partnership working and involving local people in the care and maintenance of our open spaces.

Co-opted and Appointed Representatives

The Committee's co-opted and appointed representatives made valuable contributions throughout the year not only at Overview and Scrutiny Committee, particularly when considering education issues, but also through our working groups on the Tower Hamlets Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (SACRE) and school exclusions. They all have good links with local communities and bring a different perspective to the meetings. Next year we will look to connect the representatives into some of the wider structures such as Parent Governor Forums and the Interfaith Forum. I believe this will strengthen further their role and contribution.

Improved communications

We have significantly improved how and when we communicate with Members, Officers and the public in the last year. Regular use has been made of the weekly Members Bulletin to keep members up to date with the Committee, Health Scrutiny Panel and scrutiny reviews. We raised the profile of scrutiny among officers by making regular use of the Manager's Briefing and the staff newsletter, Pulling Together. This has ensured that Council Officers are well informed about the scrutiny work programme, upcoming reviews, review findings, and how they can assist Scrutiny Members and Officers when necessary.

We have also made a concerted effort to communicate more with the public during 2005/6. We have used the Council's newspaper Eastend Life, and our Scrutiny web pages to ensure Tower Hamlets residents are informed of the work scrutiny Members are undertaking. We also encourage residents to participate in scrutiny reviews and suggest potential issues to scrutinise. We will continue to prioritise how and when we communicate with residents so that they are aware of the scrutiny role and how it can improve local services.

A Good Practice Example

We introduced Challenge Sessions this year to give Members more opportunity to discuss policy development or challenge services in an informal setting. These were particularly productive and were recognised by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation as a good practice example of scrutiny in their publication 'Frontline councillors and decision making'. They felt that Challenge Sessions allowed members to 'quickly check out the robustness of services and contribute to policy development to improve services'.

Officer Training course

In the last year, the Scrutiny Policy Team has run an internal training course "Overview and Scrutiny in Tower Hamlets" open to all officers. This provides a better understanding of how Overview and Scrutiny works locally and its impact on service delivery and improvement. We feel this course has raised the profile of the Scrutiny across the Council and made officers aware of their role in supporting the Scrutiny work programme. We will continue to offer this training course as part of the Corporate Training Programme.

Checking out our progress

Twice a year we monitor the recommendations we have made, not just those at committee but also those from our reviews and other investigations. Services are asked to provide an update so we can see whether progress is being made. The latest monitoring indicates that nearly all of our recommendations since July 2004 are being acted on or achieved. Next year I hope we will revisit one or two of our reviews and consider their impact in more detail.

We also held a session for all Scrutiny Leads that was valuable in identifying the common issues and challenges we face and suggestions to improve the way we work. We will look to hold these meetings more regularly through the year. We also held a Scrutiny Showcase in February where we heard about Overview and Scrutiny in Bracknell Forest. This demonstrated that Member-led scrutiny can take a ward issue (in this case about abandoned and untaxed cars) and, through the scrutiny process, have significant impact across a borough. We had a useful and interesting discussion around this and in particular how to involve frontline councillors in Overview and Scrutiny in future years.

Conclusion

Overall, I believe we have made further real progress in embedding scrutiny in Tower Hamlets. The proposed "community calls for action" that are being proposed by Government will give scrutiny a more direct connection to local communities and their concerns and is something that I welcome. I am sure this will provide a further catalyst to strengthening our Overview and Scrutiny process.

Creating and Sharing Prosperity **Cllr Julian Sharpe**

Tower Hamlets is facing unprecedented change and development and, as Scrutiny Lead for Creating and Sharing Prosperity, I wanted to focus on the way that local communities benefit from the development in the borough. I looked at two issues: Planning Obligations (or S.106 agreements) and the Barker Review (the Government's proposals for changing planning obligations in the future).

Planning Obligations

At our session on Planning Obligations, we were reassured that the Council has carried out extensive work to improve its policy and processes for these agreements and will continue to ensure transparency and accountability. We particularly welcomed that all the agreements are now available on the Council's website.

We wanted to see how local people could influence the type of projects that planning obligations supported in their areas and were pleased that there would be greater community involvement in the planning process, particularly through Local Area Partnerships. This would help determine the priorities for key development sites in the borough

We identified three areas for action: a member training and development session on what the changes would mean (held in November 2005), a further challenge session on the Barker Review and that the Council continues to strengthen community and member involvement in Area Action Plans and other planning documents that provide the context for achieving planning obligations.

Barker Review

Following the Barker Review into Affordable Housing, the Government announced proposals to scale back planning contributions to cover direct impacts and affordable housing only. They also suggested a Planning Gain Supplement that would be paid to Central Government with a share of the development gain given back to local councils.

The Working Group backed the Council's concerns about these proposals because the impacts of development are always wider than an immediate site and can indirectly affect many people: traffic management and open space are good examples. We felt that it was very important to capture the benefits locally, since it was local people that were likely to be most affected by any development.

We also expressed our concern at the quantity and quality of affordable housing being built in the borough and felt that this was something that should be considered for a scrutiny review next year.

I took a keen interest in monitoring the Creating and Sharing Prosperity performance indicators in the Tower Hamlets Index. A key issue raised last year was the late payment of invoices by the Council. I monitored this through the Tower Hamlets Index and am pleased to report that performance has improved significantly and will meet its target of 83% of undisputed invoices paid within 30 days. I hope performance will continue to improve.

Conclusion

As Scrutiny Lead for Creating and Sharing Prosperity, I think we have looked at two priorities that are critical if our communities are to share in the benefits of the significant development throughout the borough.

Learning Achievement and Leisure **Cllr Louise Alexander**

The Learning, Achievement and Leisure theme covers a wide range of issues including play services, schools, lifelong learning, sports opportunities and access to the arts.

Open Spaces

I initially sought to review the implementation of the Open Spaces Strategy, and met with the Director of Environment and Culture and the Director of Housing. From these meetings, it became apparent that such a review would be too early, as the Open Spaces Strategy was still in development and had not yet been submitted to Cabinet. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee did, however, consider a call-in of the Open Spaces Strategy when it was submitted to Cabinet. While this call-in was accepted unanimously by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, Cabinet only went so far as to welcome the call-in, rather than accepting its suggestions. Following Cabinet's consideration, information was circulated addressing some of the issues raised by the call-in, but as this did not address all the points raised I also had a further meeting with officers to pursue these issues. I think the implementation of the Open Spaces Strategy should be part of the future work programme of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

In initial interviews to find topics to review, I met with the Head of Access and Inclusion and the Early Years Co-ordinator. They provided me with an overview of the Early Years service. I came to the conclusion that good progress was being made and that a scrutiny review would not add significant value. This was confirmed to me by a number of awards in this area including a National Quality Award for the Children's Information Service and a Surestart award for inclusive practice for the "birthday parties" that are run to enable many statutory and voluntary organisations to bring services to families in a fun environment.

I commissioned a study of the number of children living in overcrowded conditions in different areas of the borough. This showed that 63% live with a shortage of one room or more in their household, affecting their well-being, health and ability to study.

School Exclusions

The School Exclusions Scrutiny Panel examined recent trends in school exclusions and what action the Council and schools are taking to address this. We also considered the support available to schools, pupils and their families. As part of the review we considered a number of case studies of school exclusion and visited a local school.

Although relatively short, the review was useful in considering the Council's approach and it was clear that prevention was the most effective way of reducing school exclusions. We felt that the culture of the school was an important factor in encouraging good behaviour and were impressed with the impact that the Behaviour Improvement Programme (BIP) was having in our schools. We were concerned that some schools opted out of accepting pupils that had previously been excluded and this placed extra pressure on those who did. Exclusions represented a costly and difficult intervention and we saw that early action helped avoid this and reduced the disruption to both schools and classrooms.

From our review we identified a number of areas for action including:

- the importance of monitoring exclusions data and responding quickly to new trends
- the need for schools to involve parents in behaviour management
- rolling out the BIP to all schools, particularly the Transition Worker project and Lead Professional and making sure that the lessons and improvements were shared across schools.

Tower Hamlets Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education

I led a challenge session with the Tower Hamlets Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education (SACRE). The challenge session initially explained the brief of the SACRE, in advising the Council on religious education including teaching methods, materials and training for teachers. This was particularly pertinent as our review followed the publication of a national Ofsted report on good practice. The Panel:

- welcomed the increasing numbers of student taking RE
- stressed the need to promote the work of SACRE with parents, teachers and schools
- raised concerns about the future monitoring arrangements for Religious Education (RE)

We recognised the good work of the Tower Hamlets SACRE in securing the confidence of local faith communities and that it should be promoted more widely. The session also promoted SACRE's understanding of the Council's role, and accepted that the Council would be unable to pay for a post of RE Advisor since schools would not fund the post. The Council did agree to fund the schemes of work for the new syllabus drawn up by the SACRE. The Panel also felt that the potential for joint work with neighbouring boroughs should also be explored. The representatives from the SACRE felt it was a very good session and the Council accepted all of the recommendations of the Panel.

Our Co-opted and Appointed Representatives

Last year we highlighted the need to build on the skills and knowledge of the Committee's co-opted and appointed representatives. This year we undertook some specific work with the parent-governor representatives. I worked with the Education service to agree a package of measures including:

- involvement in the Director of Education's termly meeting with the Chairs of Governors
- additional information from Governors Services
- participating in the Member Development Programme
- organising short briefing sessions every 2-3 months with Education services before the meetings of Overview and Scrutiny Committee. These will start in 2006/07.

At Overview and Scrutiny Committee, I was particularly active in using the pre-decision process to raise concerns with Cabinet before it took decisions. Our concerns did not change any of the decisions, though they did elicit more information about the reasons for decisions and the implications of different courses of action

I also received further information about the progress on the Scrutiny Youth Services Review that was undertaken in 2004/05. This showed good progress in implementing the recommendations. I have also suggested that Overview and Scrutiny considers revisiting this review to look in detail at progress next year.

Conclusion

I was impressed with the dedication of the Education Department, who are turning around a difficult situation with regard to a population, the majority of whom are from deprived and overcrowded backgrounds.

Excellent Public Services Cllr Marian Williams

My role as Scrutiny Lead for Excellent Public Services is one of the most broad reaching, as it covers all Council services and those provided by our partners.

A Partnership for Success

This year's Excellent Public Services Scrutiny Review focused on the role of ward councillors in the Tower Hamlets Partnership. I think this was very timely given the recent Government proposals for "community calls for action" and measures to enhance the community leadership role of ward councillors.

The review considered the contribution of local councillors to the Tower Hamlets Partnership including the Local Area Partnerships (LAPs). As part of this, we undertook a survey of councillors, partners and officers supporting the Partnership. This showed that councillors bring real benefits to the Partnership including local knowledge and helping with community engagement. We identified a number of challenges however, including how to develop the capacity, skills, expertise and knowledge of ward councillors. We agreed a number of suggestions to improve their contribution including a "job description" for councillors, monitoring the Local Area Agreement through LAP performance indicators, clarifying the accountability arrangements of the Area Directors and more support to councillors to develop their community leadership role.

These issues are not unique to Tower Hamlets and apply to partnership working across the country. This should not deter us however, but encourage us to seek ambitious solutions that further make the Tower Hamlets Partnership a "partnership for success."

The job description has already been agreed and is being used as part of the framework for the induction process for all councillors next year. I hope it will provide greater focus on the part that councillors can play in representing their constituents and holding local services to account.

I had hoped to look at the impact that new Safer Neighbourhood Teams were having but it wasn't possible to achieve this. Given the importance of crime and anti-social behaviour to local people, I suggest that this should be given priority for an early review in the Overview and Scrutiny work programme for 2006.

Access for Disabled People to Council Services

I also monitored the progress in implementing previous Excellent Public Services reviews. This includes last year's review that looked at access for disabled people to public services. I am very pleased to say that most of the suggestions were not only agreed but have been implemented. This includes for example, considerable changes to the Council's website to make it more accessible to disabled people.

Conclusion

Excellent Public Services cuts across all Council Directorates and many partners. As the Scrutiny Lead, I raised and considered issues over a wide range of Council activity. I think that the review around the Tower Hamlets Partnership lays important foundations for developing the leadership role of ward councillors, not only within the Partnership but also within the Council and local communities.

Health

Cllr Julia Mainwaring

The Health Scrutiny Panel undertakes the Council's functions under the Health and Social Care Act, 2001. As well as the councillors, the Panel co-opted representatives from the local PPI Forums to help promote partnership working and I would like to thank Mrs Kathleen Banks from the Barts and The London Patient and Public Involvement (PPI) Forum and Mr Nuruz Jaman from the Tower Hamlets Primary Care Trust PPI Forum for their contributions. I would also like to thank Councillor Khaled Khan who chaired the Panel from May 2005 until February 2006.

Choosing Health

Our major work this year was to look at the Government's Choosing Health agenda - one that marks a significant shift in giving health services a more preventative focus. We chose to explore the implications for the Council, partners and local people through a case study of obesity services for young people. This is a significant national and local issue: a recent House of Commons Select Committee predicting that it would soon take over from smoking as the number one health priority.

We were successful in bidding for a national Health Scrutiny Action Learning project - one of only nine nationally. The Panel ran focus groups with local people in two LAPs, as well as groups with young people and held an innovative breakfast seminar at the world renowned St John's Bread and Wine with service providers. We also held a session that focused on an innovative project - BEST - that takes a whole family approach to changing diet and activity levels.

All the sessions were very positive and agreed on the importance of parents and schools in encouraging diet and exercise, the opportunities for promoting healthy lifestyles with the 2012 Olympics and a range of suggestions that the Council and local health services could consider from using local images in promotional campaigns to action on fast food.

Our headline findings are that:

- there needs to be a much more joined up approach to and the Local Area Agreement provides an excellent opportunity to consider how we do this.
- much greater monitoring information is required to evaluate the impact of services and initiatives.
- there are a wide range of agencies and organisations that can have an impact on health prevention: it is not just health services but the Council, major employers, voluntary and community organisations that have a significant role in creating the right conditions for tackling obesity.
- long term sustainable funding for initiatives is vital.

Our recommendations are being developed and will be submitted to Cabinet and NHS partners in the summer.

The Annual Healthcheck

The Panel now has an important new role in commenting on the local NHS trust declarations to the Healthcare Commission against 24 Core Standards. These cover seven areas: safety, clinical and cost effectiveness, governance, patient focus, accessible and responsive care, care environment and amenities and public health. The Panel met with all local trusts to consider their draft declarations in October 2005 and then again to look at their final declarations in March 2006. I am glad to report that between the draft and final declarations all the trusts undertook significant action so that they could all declare that they were compliant with all 24 Core Standards.

We raised issues around the use of interpreters and the ethnic monitoring of service users and again I am pleased that they all responded positively to our comments and are taking significant measures to address them.

A new Strategic Health Authority for London

The Panel was consulted about Government proposals to change the boundaries of the London Strategic Health Authorities and Primary Care Trusts. We felt that it was very important that the PCTs matched up to local councils to promote partnership working and accountability. We felt however, that one strategic health authority for London was a good way of rationalising the structure across London and connecting better into regional government such as the Mayor of London and Greater London Assembly. I am pleased to report that this is what the Government is considering implementing.

We also received updates on the reviews from previous years. Last year's review of sexual health services for young people showed good progress with the Council, PCT and others in adopting and implementing the recommendations. We were concerned however that long term sustainable funding was still to be secured for some of the projects.

Conclusion

It has been another positive year for the Health Scrutiny Panel. Not only have we conducted an ambitious review but responded flexibly to the major demands of the Annual Healthcheck process. Next year we need to think further about deepening our relationship with the local NHS trusts. Health inequalities is a significant issue within the borough and the Panel is considering adopting this as a 'golden thread' through its work over the coming years.

Living Safely covers two of the top priorities for local people - crime and the environment - and I have tried to reflect this in my work this year.

Domestic Violence

My main review this year was around domestic violence. We had two aims. The first was to raise awareness of domestic violence and the impact that it has on victims and our communities. The second was to make recommendations about how the Council and other organisations can improve the support to victims of domestic violence.

As part of this, we met with the Council's Domestic Violence Co-ordinator, a small group of service users and organisations that provide support to victims of domestic violence. I would like to thank the five victims of domestic violence who attended and contributed to the second session of the working group. Their courage and willingness to talk openly about their experiences was moving for the members of the working group and officers present.

As our report shows, we found that there had been significant progress in providing support to domestic violence victims by both the Council and its partners. We identified a number of areas that could be improved and recommended that the Council should:

- make sure our corporate policy and framework fits with the changing national good practice.
- make it easier for victims to report domestic violence and receive support
- improve information about services and the standards that can be expected.
- do more work with the perpetrators of domestic violence to change their behaviour for agencies and organisations

Cleaner Safer Places

The Council's Best value Review of Cleaner Safer Places was discussed in detail at Committee in December. We raised many issues particularly around recycling, waste collection and keeping the streets clean. Although there has been good progress in putting the many aspects of the review into practice, we felt that further improvements were needed around recycling and the facilities available to keep the streets clean.

I also used the pre-decision process to raise concerns about the waste collection contract and the selling of a plot of open land. I think it is important that we continue to raise these concerns, so that Cabinet is aware of the views of councillors and local communities about their decisions.

Conclusion

It has been another good year on the Overview and Scrutiny Committee scrutinising Living Safely issues. Tackling difficult issues such as domestic violence, as well as issues that make the borough a cleaner safer place for local people. Overall, I think we have made good progress and I particularly hope that the Council and its partners can improve further their domestic violence services.

Living Well covers Social Services and Housing, both of which impact on many people in Tower Hamlets including some of our most vulnerable residents.

Leaving Care

I visited the Council's Leaving Care Service in September. The Leaving Care team helps young people in the Council's care prepare for their independence, as well as support once they have left care. The service works closely with young people, their carers and social workers and helps young people pursue education or training, obtain employment and suitable housing. It is a multi-disciplinary service for care-leavers aged between 16 and 25. It includes pathway advisors, specialist posts and an education centre based in Bow. I met with staff and service users and included a short presentation by trainees on how the service involved young people in developing and managing the service. I was very impressed by the good work of the service. Later in the year, I also received a briefing about the educational attainment of young people in the Council's care that highlighted their achievements and shows sustained progress.

Older People's Commissioning Strategy

I chaired a challenge session on the Council's Older People's Commissioning Strategy. Although this may sound technical and dry, it does have a real impact on the care and support offered to older people. We heard about how services are increasing their focus on the needs and wishes of older people and their carers. The Strategy was based on a partnership approach that brings older people, service providers, the Council and others with an interest in older people together to improve the care and support.

We recognised the considerable progress made in recent years in commissioning services for older people. We felt however, that the service must continue to promote a holistic approach to support and services for older people, maintain and develop the robust monitoring of services and provide further information to service users.

Best Value of Sheltered Housing

I have recently joined the Steering Group of the Best Value review of Sheltered Housing. This is comparing information about the cost and quality of sheltered housing in the borough, as well as looking at what we can learn from other councils, Registered Social Landlord and private sector providers. The Review will report back in June 2006.

Conclusion

The Living Well theme is an important one as it includes many of the most vulnerable people in our communities. My work has shown that we have many excellent services, provided by the Council and its partners, that are working with local people to provide care and support that improves the quality of their life.

Research and Scrutiny in Tower Hamlets

The Research and Scrutiny team works with councillors, officers and other partners to:

- **I**dentify issues and good practice for exploration
- **M**onitor and measure performance and data
- **P**ublicise and disseminate information and research
- **R**eview and scrutinise services and policies
- **O**ffer practical and evidence based recommendations
- **V**alue and seek the opinions of residents and stakeholders
- **E**valuate and track progress of recommendations

If you want to find out more about Overview and Scrutiny in Tower Hamlets, please contact the Scrutiny Policy Team:

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