

LONDON BOROUGH OF TOWER HAMLETS

MINUTES OF THE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

HELD AT 5.30 P.M. ON TUESDAY, 24 JULY 2012

**THE COUNCIL CHAMBER, TOWN HALL, MULBERRY PLACE, 5 CLOVE
CRESCENT, LONDON, E14 2BG**

Members Present:

Councillor Ann Jackson (Chair)
Councillor Rachael Saunders (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Tim Archer
Councillor Stephanie Eaton
Councillor Sirajul Islam
Councillor Helal Uddin

Other Councillors Present:

Co-opted Members Present:

Canon Michael Ainsworth – (Church of England Diocese Representative)

Guests Present:

Councillor Craig Aston –
Councillor Peter Golds

Officers Present:

David Galpin – (Head of Legal Services (Community), Legal Services, Chief Executive's)
Chris Holme – (Service Head Resources and Economic Development, Development & Renewal)
Isabella Freeman – (Assistant Chief Executive - Legal Services, Chief Executive's)
Frances Jones – (Service Manager OneTower Hamlets, Chief Executive's)
Louise Stamp – (Electoral Services Manager, Chief Executive's)
Simone Scott-Sawyer – (Democratic Services)

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Amy Whitelock and from the co-opted Member, Memory Kampiyawo.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Stephanie Eaton declared a personal interest in respect of agenda item 10 as a leaseholder of Island Homes;

Councillor Rachael Saunders declared a personal interest in respect of agenda item 7.3 as she worked for a business in the community.

3. UNRESTRICTED MINUTES

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

RESOLVED

That the unrestricted minutes of the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 19th June 2012 be approved and signed by the Chair as a correct record of the proceedings.

Matters arising

The Chair referred to the agenda on 19th June, item 9.1, "Strategic Performance and Corporate Revenue ..." with regards to the Carer's report and requested an update on the outcomes as promised by Councillor Alibor Choudhury.

4. REQUESTS TO SUBMIT PETITIONS

There were no petitions.

5. REQUESTS FOR DEPUTATIONS

There were no deputations.

6. SECTION ONE REPORTS 'CALLED IN'

There were none.

7. REPORTS FOR CONSIDERATION

VARIATION OF ORDER OF BUSINESS

The Chair **Moved** that the order of business be varied. Accordingly, item 7.3 was taken first, followed by items 7.2 and 7.1.

7.1 OUTLINE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME

The Chair highlighted the following areas to be reviewed:

- Youth unemployment;
- Post-16 educational attainment;
- Co-regulation and accountability of registered housing providers Supporting the third sector – transparency and value for money in allocation of mainstream grants

The Chair also highlighted a number of proposed Challenge Sessions which were intended to provide an opportunity to bring relevant stakeholders together to focus on issues of interest to the Committee, including mental ill health & housing need and crime & enforcement.

In addition, the Chair stated that members of the Committee remained concerned about the impact of welfare reform on local residents and would work with officers to understand the impact of these changes and develop an appropriate approach to scrutiny of the Council and partners' responses to these changes. It was agreed that this would begin with an initial meeting to be held in September during which members would be briefed on work to date on assessing the impact of changes to welfare benefits.

The following topics would be addressed through spotlight sessions within the Committee's scheduled meetings:

- Local democracy;
- Street cleanliness.

Cllr Saunders relayed some comments from Cllr Whitelock in her absence. She had requested that the focus for the review on post 16 attainment be on educational attainment rather attempting to cover wider associated issues about careers advice. Cllr Saunders also requested that an initial session on the local impact of changes to welfare benefits be scheduled for the early autumn and be advertised to all councillors.

Sarah Barr, Senior Strategy Policy and Performance Officer had agreed at a previous meeting to look into this issue.

RESOLVED:

That the Work Programme be noted.

7.2 SPOTLIGHT ON EMPLOYMENT & ENTERPRISE

Chris Holme, Service Head Resources and Councillor Shafiqul Haque, Cabinet Member for Jobs and Skills were both in attendance.

Cllr Haque referred to The Employment Strategy's five key aims and highlighted the Council's main goals:

1. Making the main employment agencies work together better for local residents;
2. Ensuring the money that was invested in employment was done in a smarter way;
3. Finding ways to engage better with residents who found it difficult to access the mainstream services;
4. Promoting the benefits of work – particularly amongst inactive groups;
5. Doing everything possible to capture as many employment opportunities as possible for local residents.

There were agreed objectives in the Enterprise Strategy that provided an environment for business to flourish including:

- Focussing support on small and medium sized businesses - helping start-up and growth;
- Maximising local procurement;
- Developing the business forum and the Mayor's Employment and Enterprise Board.

This was one of longest and deepest recessions in living memory, which therefore meant that officers worked in the most challenging of environments. However, the challenge was to make every penny count to deliver jobs for local people and business for local suppliers.

Better relations must be forged with Job Centre Plus and the Council was delivering real, sustainable jobs for local people.

Some of the barriers residents faced were language barriers for which there was now additional funding for "English as a Second Language" in this year's budget.

Action points

Chris Holme endeavoured to report back to the Committee on the following:

- *With regards to the increase in unemployment among 50 – 64 year olds, Members were keen to understand the reason for the increase and had asked that an analytical review be conducted;*
- *With reference to the DWP's Work Programme, Members asked what targets had been set and when would information be available about performance of the contractors against these targets;*
- *There were areas of the borough in which economic inactivity rates were particularly high, particularly in the east of the borough. Cllr Uddin asked what was the Council's approach when tackling unemployment in such areas - was there any data/were there any statistics available on this?*

- *In relation to the regeneration funds previously managed by the Council, including the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund and Working Neighbourhoods Fund, Cllr Uddin asked what evaluation had been done on the success of programmes intended to support the developments of sustainable social enterprises in the borough?*

There was a request that the Council look further at what work could be done to encourage employers to offer greater opportunities for flexible working, including part time work. The Chair welcomed Mr Holme's comments on the importance of supporting social enterprise and the third sector as key sectors of the local economy and sought Mr Holme's views on the Council's current approach and whether there was room to further strengthen this work. She highlighted the success which Hackney had had in reducing unemployment despite it having a highly transient population, similar to Tower Hamlets and asked if there was good practice which could be shared by them? She further requested that as information was made available from Census data due to be published in the autumn, that the Committee be kept updated on the profile of economically inactive people in the borough.

The Chair also referred Chris Holme to the Committee's work programme for 2012-13 and highlighted where the aforementioned points tallied with the Council's overall employment and enterprise objectives. She was of the view that it would be useful to get regular updates and have a link with Chris Holme's team, in order to be able to take the Council's objectives forward. She stated that any officer proposals in this regard would be welcome.

RESOLVED:

That the officer's verbal presentation be noted.

7.3 ELECTORAL SERVICES - REGISTRATION OF ELECTORS & CONDUCT OF ELECTIONS

Isabella Freeman, Assistant Chief Executive, Legal Services and Louise Stamp, Electoral Services Manager, were both in attendance. Louise Stamp gave a PowerPoint presentation for Members on Electoral Services and its role in voter registration. In response to some Members' questions, the following points were outlined:

- Trying to ascertain or identify the most effective way of reaching out to the community to encourage residents to respond to the electoral canvass was an on-going priority for the Service. Maintaining an up to date and accurate electoral register was challenging for a number of reasons, including a low response rate to the canvas from people living in private gated housing developments, a problem which was compounded by the transient nature of the borough's population. Letters had been sent to the Managing Agents of private properties in an attempt to encourage responses and to ensure that officers canvassing were able to access the building, but this has not had a significant impact on the response rate;

- To ensure the integrity of the electoral register, a canvass of properties with more than six residents was conducted immediately prior to elections, to remove electors from the register if they no longer resided at properties in the borough;
- The law stated that the information provided by a resident about the people living at the same address must be taken at face value;
- Investigations by the returning officer can only be conducted if there was evidence of some discrepancy;
- In order to tackle the poor responses to canvassers from some residents in the community, outreach work was being carried out and election material written was published in languages other than English, for example Bengali, to ensure large sections of the community were reached;
- Wilful non-responders had been prosecuted attracting a £465 fine and it was hoped that this would act as a deterrent;
- Individual voter registration would be compulsory from 2014. The Council's records would be matched with the records from the DWP. If there were any discrepancies, the information would be rejected and subjected to further verification and checks;
- Prior to the next elections in 2014, pre-meetings would also be arranged with agents to discuss ways of ensuring community liaison, with a view to facilitating the electoral/voting process for residents;
- If registration information appeared to be questionable, electoral officers could request evidence to verify the resident's identity for example by cross referring with a recent utility bill or passport;
- Work had also been carried out at schools and citizenship ceremonies to encourage as many residents as possible to register;
- There was a dedicated officer who performed outreach work, particularly aimed at local Bengali women, explaining the importance of registering the right to vote. The Women's Tower Hamlets Inclusive Network had been contacted to identify women's groups in the borough who could host such outreach activities;
- In order to ascertain whether different registration forms could increase voter registration response rates, a pilot was being conducted with the Cabinet Office Behavioural Rights team whereby simplified forms were sent to a sample of properties. A comparison will be made with registration rates in areas where the normal forms were submitted and the results would be analysed in December 2012.

Members requested that the Assistant Chief Executive report back to the committee on the results of the annual canvas in November and again in February following the completion of the postal vote registration process.

The Chair thanked the officers for their presentation.

RESOLVED:

That the presentation be noted.

8. VERBAL UPDATES FROM SCRUTINY LEADS

Councillor Helal Uddin, Scrutiny Lead Member for Resources

A meeting had been held with Chris Holme, Service Head for Resources, Development and Renewal Directorate, on the scope and timing of the Scrutiny Review on Mainstream Grants. The following points were clarified:

- The process for reviewing and making recommendations on allocation of Mainstream Grants had been revised;
- The new process was approved by Cabinet in March 2012;
- The process for the allocation of grants for 2012 – 15 was due to conclude by the end of September 2012.

With regards to the Review scope and timing, the following points were outlined:

- The Service was committed to ensuring that a transparent process welcomed the engagement of Scrutiny Members in ensuring that transparency was achieved;
- October was considered a suitable time for the Review meetings to take place when the process had been completed, but the issue was still “live”;
- It was suggested that the Council engaged with the Third Sector Advisory Board to identify voluntary organisations to involve in the Review group.

It was anticipated that a more detailed scope for the Review would be developed over the summer.

Councillor Sirajul Islam, Scrutiny Lead Member for Development and Renewal

Cllr Islam had had an introductory meeting with the Corporate Director, Development and Renewal to discuss the work programme. He would be meeting Jackie Odunoye to take the scrutiny review work forward.

RESOLVED:

That the verbal updates be noted.

9. PRE-DECISION SCRUTINY OF SECTION ONE (UNRESTRICTED) CABINET PAPERS

Nil items.

10. ANY OTHER SECTION ONE (UNRESTRICTED) BUSINESS WHICH THE CHAIR CONSIDERS TO BE URGENT

The Chair referred to a late Cabinet report tabled for the Committee titled “One Housing Group – integration of Island Homes” requiring an urgent decision by Cabinet on 25th July.

Members were apprehensive about the hasty request for the OSC to agree to the report and questioned why it had not been placed on the Forward Plan and submitted to the Committee through the normal channels. The financial implications were also of concern to some Members. The Chair therefore proposed querying the following points at the Cabinet meeting on 25th July:

- The lack of accounts for 2011 – 12 and whether or not the Housing Group was still viable;
- The lack of a credible explanation as to the tardiness of the report;
- Was the variation to the pension bid as expected – was the Council liable?
- With reference to part three of the appendix, were there any performance issues to take into account?
- Local labour clause – this should be mandatory.

Parent Governor and Co-optee vacancies

Regrettably, the Parent Governor nomination was still outstanding due to a delay with the completion of the elections for Parent Governor representatives.

Similarly, the Co-optee vacancies were still unfilled and it was anticipated that these would be resolved by the next meeting in September.

The meeting ended at 7.35 p.m.

Chair, Ann Jackson

Overview & Scrutiny Committee