

**UNITE TOWER HAMLETS  
COMMENTS TO OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY TRANSPARENCY  
COMMISSION  
SEPTEMBER 2015**

It is understood that an announcement will be made soon that East End Life will be weekly until Christmas/ fortnightly until March and then comply with the Government directive on such Council publications. This would not appear to be a good start in keeping residents better informed about Council activity, processes and decisions and alternatives need to be considered.

The Mayor and elected members can make more transparent decisions if they make these in public and the process is physically transparent, with an opportunity for public participation and engagement. There appears to be a trend for decisions to be made in private without public scrutiny and input. An example was the decision making process for grant allocation under the last Mayoral administration which in part led to the Secretary of State's imposition of Commissioners. The same principles of transparency must apply to Commissioner decision making, as the introduction of "special measures" should not be an excuse for a lack of transparency and accountability which is effectively a disenfranchisement of local residents.

Unite considers some simple steps towards transparency in governance would be:-

- That Cabinet/ Committee agendas are published and circulated in accordance with the spirit of statutory Access to Information requirements (5 working days before a meeting).
  - ✓ Availability of one copy of the agenda at the Town Hall Reception at 5pm, or later, on the statutory publication date does not comply with the spirit of the statute Posting or couriering the next day, or later, significantly reduces the opportunity for Members/public to read/digest the contents of the agenda and engage with the decision making process.
  - ✓ The agenda should, unless there are very exceptional circumstances, contain all minutes/ reports detailed on the agenda rather than an agenda with several reports marked 'to follow' and then late publication/circulation of several supplementary agendas 1 or 2 days later, or worse... papers circulated at the meeting. This approach is not conducive to fully informed discussion and smooth decision making by Members, who may not have received all the papers or who have to flick between several agenda packs to find the information they feel merits discussion. Again it significantly reduces the opportunity for Members or the public to read/digest and engage with the decision making process. A new approach would require a directive from the new CE and CMT support.

- The restoration of the provision within the Council's Constitution for public deputations at Cabinet/Committee meetings providing appropriate notice is given and criteria met (as with petitions) as this provision was deleted from the Constitution and limits the scope for engagement and controversial debate.
- Review of the criteria around exemption of Cabinet/ Committee reports from publication to ensure it is fit for purpose. It is thought this was revised by Officers in more recent controversial political times to "manage" public or backbench Member engagement in the decision making process and prevent leaks. This can lead to the farcical position of Members having the constitutional right to Call In Mayoral/ Cabinet decisions for scrutiny but being unable to read the information forming the basis of the decision and formulate a case for Call In. There should be a mechanism, independent of Officers and Mayor/Members involved in the decision making process, to validate the legitimacy of exemption from publication of reports ...Chair of OSC (as with urgent decision making)? Speaker of Council? Chair of Standards Committee?
- More Council meetings should be held outside the Town Hall, whether in Council buildings or community venues, as the accessibility of Mulberry Place does not assist public engagement with the decision making process.
- The Council and Democracy webpage is not easy to navigate when looking for some things which are fundamental...old Cabinet reports for example are buried at the end of a long route with the signposting not obvious to the public.

Unite considers that there tends to be a lack of transparency surrounding the appointment of senior officers or their departure from the Council whether interim or otherwise, this leads to an unproductive culture of gossip and intrigue. Whilst understanding there is a committee process for senior officer appointments and an imperative to protect personal data and privacy, a consistent and transparent approach is needed based on an organisational culture of openness.

Council decision making would be more transparent and accountable if where decisions are Called In for scrutiny at the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and are referred on, the referral should be to a committee or person other than the original decision maker for determination.