

LONDON BOROUGH OF TOWER HAMLETS

MINUTES OF THE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

HELD AT 7.00 P.M. ON TUESDAY, 29 JULY 2008

**M71, 7TH FLOOR, TOWN HALL, MULBERRY PLACE, 5 CLOVE CRESCENT,
LONDON, E14 2BG**

Members Present:

Councillor Abdul Asad (Chair)
Councillor Waiseul Islam
Councillor Ann Jackson
Councillor Shiria Khatun
Councillor Abjol Miah
Councillor A A Sardar
Councillor Tim O'Flaherty (In place of Councillor Stephanie Eaton)

Other Councillors Present:

Councillor Marc Francis – (Lead Member, Housing and Development)
Councillor Ahmed Hussain –
Councillor Harun Miah –
Councillor Joshua Peck – (Lead Member, Resources and Performance)
Councillor Lutfur Rahman – (Leader of the Council)

Officers Present:

Alan Finch – (Service Head Corporate Finance, Resources)
Afazul Hoque – (Acting Scrutiny Policy Manager, Scrutiny and Equalities, Chief Executive's)
Michael Keating – (Acting Assistant Chief Executive, Chief Executive's)
Alan Steward – (Interim Service Head, Strategy and Performance)
Jebin Syeda – (Scrutiny Policy Officer, Scrutiny and Equalities, Chief Executive's)
Owen Whalley – (Service Head, Major Project Development, Development & Renewal)
Graham White – (Interim Legal Services Manager, Chief Executive's)
Amanda Thompson – (Team Leader - Democratic Services)

1. COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP

The Chair reported that Councillor Abjol Miah had replaced Councillor Shahed Ali on the Committee.

2. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Stephanie Eaton and Bill Turner.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillors Marc Francis, Joshua Peck and Lutfur Rahman each declared a personal and prejudicial interest in agenda item 6.1 on the basis that they were Members of the Cabinet when the original decision was taken. Councillor Francis provided information and answered questions in relation to the Cabinet's decision during discussion of the item but all three Councillors left the room during the Committee's decision making and voting.

4. UNRESTRICTED MINUTES

That the unrestricted minutes of the meeting held on 1 July 2008 be confirmed and as a correct record.

5. REQUESTS TO SUBMIT PETITIONS

None received.

6. REQUESTS FOR DEPUTATIONS

None received.

7. SECTION ONE REPORTS 'CALLED IN'

7.1 Report Called In - London Thames Gateway Development Corporation - Draft Bromley-by-Bow Land Use Design Brief

Further to their respective declarations of a personal and prejudicial interest, Councillors Marc Francis, Joshua Peck and Lutfur Rahman left the room during the Committee's decision making and voting on this item.

Mr Michael Keating outlined the call-in procedure to the Committee.

Councillor Miah for the Call-In Members referred to the reasons in their requisition and highlighted the main issues that they held with the provisionally agreed decision to agree the 12 week consultation period for the Bromley-by-Bow Land Use and Design Brief prior to its approval by the Authority as 'Interim Planning Guidance'.

Councillor Miah stated that the issue of a community cemetery in the Borough had been pressing for some time and was a demand that had clearly come from Tower Hamlets residents. It was also something that, were it to be achieved, would add to community cohesion. Given that the Bromley by Bow draft plan was about future development in the area, the opportunity should have been taken to examine the feasibility of a community cemetery in the area. Such a feasibility study had been wrongly omitted from the planning considerations.

Councillor Harun then responded to questions from the Committee concerning the location and size of any potential cemetery, the cost of the land, and the effect that this could have on planned housing.

Councillor Marc Francis, Lead Member for Housing and Development, then addressed the Committee on behalf of the Cabinet in response to the Call-in and made the following points:

In January 2008 the Cabinet approved a short term measure to ensure that Tower Hamlets residents were not disadvantaged by having no burial facility in the Borough by providing a burial subsidy at the Gardens of Peace and City of London cemeteries, while at the same time pursuing the feasibility of an in-Borough facility through the Local Development Framework across the whole Borough

The area was of key importance to the Council as it would provide a new neighbourhood centre for Bromley-by-Bow including new retail opportunities, new community facilities, public open space, a new primary school and new residential development – including a substantial provision of affordable and family housing. These new facilities, in particular the new primary school were essential to serve the existing and future communities in the Bromley-by-Bow area.

Locating a burial facility in this area would cost the Council £49m in capital costs and £11m in annual revenue costs. Further, it would reduce the viability and land available for the infrastructure identified above and would be unlikely to gain planning permission.

Committee Members then put detailed questions to Councillor Francis on a number of issues concerning a possible feasibility study, the consultation process, and other possible methods of funding.

Following the debate the Committee voted on whether to refer the item back to the Cabinet for further consideration and it was

RESOLVED:

That the alternative course of action proposed in the Call-in be not pursued and the decision of the cabinet be confirmed.

8. SCRUTINY SPOTLIGHT: LEAD MEMBER

Councillor Josh Peck, Lead member for Resources and Performance, gave a presentation on the key issues, opportunities and challenges arising from his portfolio.

Councillor Peck informed the Committee that he had two clear aims for the area of Resources - improving customer satisfaction and providing value for money. The main focus would be looking at how residents interacted with the Council and how ICT systems could be improved in order to make services more efficient and reduce the need for duplication. For example residents were often required to provide the same information to different departments as this information was not recorded centrally. He also stated the Administration's intent to implement more strategic procurement policies and make better use of Council assets to support the achievement of Council objectives.

With regard to performance Councillor Peck stressed that the Council's 4-star rating would mean nothing to residents if their needs were not met, and a lot of new challenging LAA targets had been agreed in order to continue driving forward performance.

Members of the Committee asked questions on a number of related issues including an IT Strategy, communications, the use of consultants, the Pension Fund, and the effects of the population growth on the Council's resources.

Councillor Peck then responded in detail to the concerns raised.

The Committee noted that everything the Council delivered involved the use of ICT and it was therefore imperative to have a more sophisticated system that linked all services more effectively.

The Council's Investment Panel was very proactive in monitoring the performance of the Council's Pension Fund and it was important to consider it as a long-term rather than short-term investment. Funds had been rediversified to counteract the fall in stocks and shares, and contributions still outweighed losses.

The Chair thanked Councillor Peck for his presentation.

9. BUDGET AND POLICY FRAMEWORK ISSUES

9.1 Resource Allocation and Budget Review 2009/10 - 2010/11

Councillor Peck presented the report which began the process of reviewing the Council's three year budget prior to setting the Council tax for 2009/10. The report also identified how the Council could maximise the opportunities of having an agreed three year budget position.

Councillor Peck reported that both the General Fund and the Housing Revenue Account had been underspent in the previous year and were now in a strong, healthy position. However he advised that although these underspends were brought about by effective management of resources, the conditions which enabled this to take place were largely fortuitous and continuous assessment and vigilance would still be needed to ensure the Council's remained in a strong position.

Arising from the question and answer session that followed the Committee

RESOLVED

That the following comments be submitted to the Cabinet for consideration:

The Committee welcome the underspend on both the General Fund and Housing Revenue Account and seek assurances from the Lead Member that this money will be invested to address some of the major needs in the Borough such as overcrowding.

The Committee have been assured that if inflation rises dramatically then funds will have to be sought from the reserves to ensure there is not a significant rise in Council Tax. The Lead Member also acknowledged that the cost of living is increasing dramatically and any increase in Council Tax will have to reflect this.

The Committee ask that consideration be given through both the Council's funds generally and the Working Neighbourhood Fund specifically to addressing unemployment in specific wards as this is having significant impact on families.

Overview and Scrutiny Members recognise that this is the first part of our scrutiny of the budget process and look forward to further more detailed discussions as part of the Council budget setting process. The Committee also welcome the assurance from the Lead Member on the involvement of the third sector and voluntary agencies in the budget consultation process.

10. PERFORMANCE MONITORING

10.1 Tower Hamlets Index

Councillor Peck introduced the first monitoring report for the new Tower Hamlets Index which reflected the new Strategic Plan 2008/09 and the new Local Area Agreement.

He advised the Committee that the performance indicator framework had been revised following the introduction of the new national indicators, and the

targets for all indicators were set to assist the Council in reaching its ambition of being one of the top performers in inner London.

In response to a question concerning the use of 'Amber' indicators, Councillor Peck advised that this should be viewed positively as it meant that although a target had not yet been met it was expected to be by the year end.

RESOLVED

That the report be noted.

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

The Chair MOVED and it was: -

RESOLVED

That the following pre-decision questions be submitted to Cabinet for consideration:

Agenda Item 6.1 Recycling Improvement Plan for Tower Hamlets (CAB 018/089)

1. Does the Cabinet feel that the targets we have set are ambitious enough and what are the comparisons with other boroughs?
2. In regards to kitchen waste the report does not mention how households will be expected to manage the storage/smell of their waste containers. Can the Cabinet clarify this?
3. Will the Cabinet consider introducing recycling litter bins?
4. Can the Cabinet consider introducing a scheme to cover white goods / electronics which would allow residents to arrange collection at a specific point and time similar to that provided for unwanted household collection?

Agenda Item 6.2 Review of Public Footway Trading Fees and Charges 2008/09 (CAB 019/089)

In regards to public space for table and chairs - will we have very specific instructions for license holders including specific agreed areas and times and perhaps a 'penalty' for encroaching?

Agenda Item 6.3 Compulsory Purchase Action for 4 Long-Term Vacant Properties (CAB 020/089)

Will the Cabinet consider offering the properties to RSLs at current market value to increase the social housing available from this CPO?

Agenda Item 6.4 Housing Priority Areas 2008/10(CAB 021/089)

Can the Cabinet consider the needs of disabled people under the priority to relieve overcrowding as some people in this group may be able to move but their new properties will need to be designed to meet their needs?

Agenda Item 10.2 Working Neighbourhoods Fund (CAB 031/089)

As there is a severe lack of funding for ESOL Level 1 and 2 in Tower Hamlets as a whole it directly affects cohesive neighbourhoods and also residents ability and skills to seek employment. Will the Cabinet give some thought on how WNF can be allocated to fund and direct future delivery of this service?