

LONDON BOROUGH OF TOWER HAMLETS

MINUTES OF THE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

HELD AT 6.33 P.M. ON MONDAY, 22 JUNE 2020

ONLINE 'VIRTUAL' MEETING - [HTTPS://TOWERHAMLETS.PUBLIC-I.TV/CORE/PORTAL/HOME](https://towerhamlets.public-i.tv/core/portal/home)

Members Present:

Councillor James King (Chair)	
Councillor Sufia Alam (Vice-Chair)	
Councillor Kahar Chowdhury	– Scrutiny Lead for Health & Adults
Councillor Dipa Das	– Scrutiny Lead for Housing & Regeneration
Councillor Marc Francis	
Councillor Tarik Khan	– Scrutiny Lead for Resources & Finance
Councillor Bex White	– Scrutiny Lead for Community Safety & Environment
Councillor Andrew Wood	

Co-opted Members Present:

Halima Islam	– Co-Optee
James Wilson	– Co-Optee

Others Present:

Jackie Applebee	– Chair of Tower Hamlets LMC
Pam Bhamra	– Chair of Tower Hamlets Community Housing
Doctor Naureen Bhatti	– Vice-Chair of Tower Hamlets LMC
Zoe Folley	– (Committee Officer, Governance)
Sister Christine Frost	– (Neighbours in Poplar)
Sharon Godman	– (Divisional Director, Strategy, Policy and Performance)
Afazul Hoque	– (Head of Corporate Strategy & Policy)
Muna Ismail	– (MIND Tower Hamlets)
Daniel Kerr	– (Strategy and Policy Manager)
David Knight	– (Senior Democratic Services Officer)
Ian Parkes	– Chair of ELBA

1. WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

The Chair:

- Welcomed everybody to the meeting and informed those in attendance that this meeting is being recorded and will be available to view via the Council's website by tomorrow morning.
- It is important that these formal scrutiny meetings resume as the Council must continue to demonstrate transparency and openness in its decision-making, and include scrutiny as part and parcel of the Council's operations for and on behalf of the residents of Tower Hamlets;
- Following Government advice to avoid all but essential travel and to practice social distancing, this will be a virtual meeting. If during the meeting a technical error occurs with the transmission which cannot be resolved within a reasonable period of time, then the meeting will be closed and the remaining business will be deferred to a subsequent meeting of the Committee on a date to be determined, and notified by way of the publication of the agenda on the Council's web site;
- Congratulated Councillor Eve McQuillan appointment as the Cabinet Member for Planning and Social Inclusion.
- Congratulated Councillor Sufia Alam who would be shortly taking up an appointment as the Mayoral Advisor for Community and Voluntary Sector, and to support young people post Covid-19. The Committee noted that as Councillor Alam was yet to take up her appointment she could still participate in tonight's meeting.

2. DECLARATIONS OF DISCLOSABLE PECUNIARY INTEREST

Nil items

3. UNRESTRICTED MINUTES

3.1 Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 24th February 2020

The Chair **Moved** and it was:

RESOLVED that on the basis of the information and advice received that the decision to close this service did not meet the threshold of a key decision.

The committee further discussed how it might be advisable for the council to conduct some of the exercises a key decision warrants, like public consultation or sign off by an appropriate Executive member when service proposed for closure are long standing, public facing or likely to produce a strong public reaction.

4. REQUESTS TO SUBMIT PETITIONS

Nil items

5. COVID-19 COMMUNITY INSIGHT

The Committee continued its review of the Borough's response to COVID-19 with the aim of supporting Tower Hamlets efforts by:

1. Offering recommendations for areas to be improved.
2. Learning about the work being undertaken to respond to the pandemic; and
3. Reflecting upon local feedback received regarding the plans that have been put in place to support the Borough's residents.

The outcome of this review being to capture the response in Tower Hamlets (not just the Council's) and to identify learning and appropriate actions to be taken forward should there be subsequent waves of the pandemic.

The report is intended to cover three key areas:

- a. An assessment of how the Council has handled the response.
- b. An assessment of recovery phase; and
- c. What key challenges remain and how the Council can improve its future Pandemic Plan.

In addition, it will capture the work across all the scrutiny committees and the aim is to agree the report at September's OSC meeting.

The Committee then heard from the following members from the community and in partner organisations to help the Committee gain a better understanding of the impact of the Council's response to COVID-19 on the community. The discussions on these presentations may be summarised as follows:

Pam Bhamra, Chair of Tower Hamlets Housing Forum and Director of Operations at Tower Hamlets Community Housing.

The Committee noted that Ms. Bhamra welcomed the partnership approach which has been delivered and valued involvement in the Pandemic Committee and Community Mobilisation Silver Group. She highlighted the importance of replacing and reinventing community centres with online activities and identified overcrowding in households as a key issue which has had a knock-on effect on people not isolating effectively, allowed the virus to spread more easily, and put a strain on home schooling. She also identified isolation and loneliness as key issues.

The Committee:

1. Indicated that it would wish to see how the Council and housing partners intended to provide long term support for homeless/rough sleepers residents who have been supported into hostels and temporary accommodation.

2. Wanted the Council to review the quality of its short-term accommodation, especially in instances where families with children have been placed in accommodation with shared facilities and amenities; and
3. Noted that the Housing and Regeneration Sub-Committee would be exploring some of these issues further at their meeting on the 13 July 2020.

Ian Parkes, Chief Executive of East London Business Alliance (ELBA)

Mr Parkes provided his feedback on the impact on businesses and the economy. He praised the strong partnership approach and the robust leadership role that the Council has taken. The Committee was pleased to note that ELBA have had no notifications of business closures or insolvency. However, it was noted that the key challenges for businesses are impending as most small businesses will not be able to keep running beyond 3 months if lockdown does not end reasonably quickly. Also, while there has been relatively little feedback from firms in high distress, this it was noted may change in the months ahead as businesses reopen and begin to incur costs whilst their revenues are slower to recover.

The Committee questioned the fairness of the discretionary grant for market traders and indicated that it would like the Council to review this and provide further information on how this grant has been apportioned. Mr Parkes also identified a number of other issues which will be explored further in (a) the Sub Committee meetings; and (b) the report including support for VCS organisations, employment support for education leavers in 2021 and support for school and college students who have lost out on significant time in their education.

Dr Jackie Applebee and Dr Naureen Bhatti, Chair and Vice Chair of Tower Hamlets LMC

The Committee received a summary of the key health challenges that Tower hamlets is facing. With the high levels of deprivation and residents of BAME origin, Bangladeshi residents, Tower Hamlets it was noted has particularly difficult challenges in protecting its population from COVID 19. It is therefore imperative in the fight to drive to bring down the infection and hence death rate that there is the introduction of a (i) robust; (ii) locally organised, community test, track, isolate and support programme. It was noted that mortality in care homes has been significant, with some care homes in Tower Hamlets having nearly thirty deaths.

The Committee was concerned to note that the lack of community testing and PPE for care home staff and for key workers in general is likely to have led to unnecessary transmission of the virus. The Committee noted with satisfaction that whilst this has improved as the pandemic has progressed, there is a need to see a sustained focus and improvement in this area. Two other key challenges the Committee noted were the assessment and treatment of other conditions being put on hold, and the worsening of pre-existing mental health

issues or suffering mental illness for the first time due to anxieties regarding COVID 19. It was noted that the Health Sub-Committee would be exploring these plans in this area in further detail at their meeting on 20 July 2020.

Sister Christine from Neighbours in Poplar

Sister Christine fed back her experiences and findings. Significantly, she felt that many of the issues which have presented themselves were not a result of COVID-19 but were pre-existing and exposed by the pandemic. The lack of internet access it was noted has made the issue of isolation more acute and the reliance of the Council to communicate via digital methods has excluded many older and younger residents. Similarly, the vast scale of mental health issues has been highlighted and exacerbated by the pandemic. Moreover, this pandemic has revealed the necessity to support the Boroughs most vulnerable residents with access to hot meals. The Committee understood the Meals on Wheels service was removed and the Committee asks that the Council consider how they can work with community organisations to ensure residents are provided with a hot meal. The Committee therefore wanted to see the Council review its provision in this area, especially as we enter the winter months when a second wave could emerge. The Committee identified that during this pandemic many people who have not historically been involved in community activism have engaged, volunteered, and helped to set up mutual aid groups. The Committee felt that the Council needs to ensure it does all it can to support and sustain the interests and participation of these individuals as we move further into the recovery and many of these people will have to return to work and may not have as much time to offer.

Accordingly, the Chair moved, and it was agreed the following key themes arising from this discussion were as follows:

The Council needs to:

- A. Do more with partners and residents to support those residents without internet access.
- B. Build on supporting rough sleepers we accommodated to ensure they do not end up in streets.
- C. Build on health response to ensure we capture learning for any second wave; and
- D. Consider how the Council can better mobilise in future pandemic/emergency, ensuring learning from this is utilised and working with VCS organisations and building on the unprecedented community response.

6. UNRESTRICTED REPORTS 'CALLED IN'

Nil items

7. VERBAL UPDATES FROM SCRUTINY LEADS

Item deferred

8. FORTHCOMING DECISIONS

Noted

9. PRE-DECISION SCRUTINY OF UNRESTRICTED CABINET PAPERS

As per attached appendices

10. ANY OTHER UNRESTRICTED BUSINESS WHICH THE CHAIR CONSIDERS TO BE URGENT

Nil items

11. EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

As the agenda circulated contained no exempt/ confidential business and there was therefore no requirement to exclude the press and public to allow for its consideration.

12. EXEMPT/ CONFIDENTIAL MINUTES

Nil items

13. EXEMPT/ CONFIDENTIAL REPORTS 'CALLED IN'

Nil items

14. PRE-DECISION SCRUTINY OF EXEMPT/ CONFIDENTIAL) CABINET PAPERS

Nil items

15. ANY OTHER EXEMPT/ CONFIDENTIAL BUSINESS THAT THE CHAIR CONSIDERS URGENT

Nil items

The meeting ended at 8.30 p.m.

**Chair, Councillor James King
Overview & Scrutiny Committee**