


Non-Executive Report of the: Overview & Scrutiny Committee 21/09/2020	 TOWER HAMLETS
Report of Sharon Godman Divisional Director Strategy, Policy and Performance	Classification: Unrestricted
Review of London Borough of Tower Hamlets' Response to COVID-19	

Originating Officer(s)	Daniel Kerr (Strategy & Policy Manager) Adam Boey (Senior Strategy & Policy Manager)
Wards affected	All Wards

Reasons for urgency: This report has been published after the publication deadline as it needs to be presented to the Overview & Scrutiny before the end of the Municipal Year. This will be the last chance for the existing membership to agree the report.

1. SUMMARY

- 1.1. This paper submits the report and recommendations of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee's (OSC) review of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. OSC has aimed to offer an alternate view of the council's response to the pandemic and reflect local feedback on the plans in place to support residents. OSC has aimed to capture the borough's response (not just council) and understand what we have learnt and will do differently if there are subsequent waves. Following the very first virtual OSC meeting in May to consider the council's response to the pandemic and feed into the council's recovery plans, OSC and its Sub-Committees held a number of virtual meetings throughout June and July to listen to community insight and consider the immediate and long term challenges the council will be facing. This report considers scrutiny activity in response to the pandemic, makes recommendations on what the council and partners need to consider as it recovers and returns to business as usual, and reflects on how the council can improve its pandemic plan and be better placed to respond should a similar pandemic happen again.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 2.1. The Overview & Scrutiny Committee is recommended to note the report and recommendations.
- 2.2. Authorise the Divisional Director Strategy, Policy & Performance to amend the report following comments by the Committee, in consultation with the OSC Chair, following agreement of the report at OSC.

3. DETAILS OF REPORT

- 3.1. As the COVID-19 pandemic forced the Council to adapt its services and redeploy resources to support the local emergency response to the pandemic, the Overview & Scrutiny Committee (OSC) adapted its work programme to consider how Members can best support the Council and residents during the crisis, and lead on local-led scrutiny of the operational response and recovery plans.
- 3.2. A huge number of people across the Council and in partner organisations have been engaged in the response to the pandemic and the recovery, and OSC has attempted to cover as many areas as possible. OSC began its scrutiny of the Council's response to COVID-19 with the submission of a number of written questions to Council services at the beginning of May. OSC held its first virtual meeting on the 21 May. This provided an opportunity for Members to follow up on the response they received to their written submission and featured a spotlight with the Mayor, Chief Executive and Director of Public Health. This was followed by a meeting in June which featured presentations from a few well-placed members of the community and in partner organisations. They provided valuable insight into the impact of the Council's response to COVID-19 on the community and covered areas of health, employment, housing and the community and voluntary sector.
- 3.3. As lockdown restrictions continue to ease and the borough gradually begins to get back into the rhythm of delivering for residents, there are three main challenges ahead:
 - Preparing for a second wave of the pandemic.
 - Assessing and planning for the financial and economic impacts of the pandemic over the coming year.
 - Preparing the borough in the long term for new economic realities and tackling the inequalities the pandemic has exposed and will deepen.
- 3.4. Significantly, OSC feel that many of the issues which have presented themselves were not born out of COVID-19 but were pre-existing and exposed by the pandemic. Issues such as digital inclusion, loneliness, mental health, health disparities for BAME groups and inadequate food

provision for elderly and vulnerable people are all issues that existed long before the emergence of COVID-19.

3.5. This report makes the following recommendations:

Recommendation 1: COVID-19 Impacts Commission

Establish a commission to collate and disseminate information (including specifically to Overview and Scrutiny and other members) on impacts of COVID-19 on residents and stakeholders, service users and services and develop an understanding on long term trends of COVID-19, including differing demand for office space and housing and health services.

Recommendation 2: Digital Inclusion

Produce a new digital inclusion strategy that looks at how the Council could actively help those who are digitally excluded to get online, building on the 2015-18 strategy.

Recommendation 3: VCS support

That the Council and its partners directly support the Voluntary and Community Sector to transition in recovery, and work together to develop a sustainable model for the sector.

Recommendation 4: BAME Communities

That the borough's Test and Trace Programme utilise local networks; including GP practices, community and faith organisations to target these groups to increase uptake and understanding of the test and trace programme.

Recommendation 5: Council finances

- A. Audit all saleable assets with an assessment for sale against a long-term cost-benefit analysis
- B. Assess impact on services of proposed job losses, particularly post-furlough (in October)
- C. Produce a report on approach to commercialisation for 2020-21, and 2021-22; particularly in Parks and Culture. The Commercialisation Board to explain overall approach to OSC in 2021/22
- D. Scrutiny leads to review in depth their areas of savings and income as part of quarterly budget monitoring

Recommendation 6: The Local Economy

That the Council works with partners to undertake scenario-planning to model the impact on the local economy and start to plan mitigation.

Recommendation 7: Support for Market Traders

Ensure market traders are provided with business development support to increase their resilience and if future grants become available better

support market traders to ensure their COVID-19 costs are covered in the same way as was offered to other businesses.

Recommendation 8: Food provision

Support community organisations to ensure vulnerable and isolated residents have adequate access to a hot meal. Where GDPR allows, the Council should collate all the addresses and needs of residents identified with the need for regular hot meals by VCS partners.

Recommendation 9

The Council should part fund and work with other funding providers to ensure this need continues to be met by our VCS.

Recommendation 10

Further analysis should take place on the causes of need to understand how much was pre-existing and exacerbated by the pandemic, versus how much is new need relating to job losses or social distancing impacting on informal caring networks

Recommendation 11: Shielding vulnerable residents

Maintain and resource local pathways beyond September with Primary Care Networks for shielding in anticipation of subsequent waves.

Recommendation 12: Local test and trace

Report on the effectiveness/performance/reach of local test, trace, isolate programme as part of the ongoing response to the pandemic – with results reviewed before the winter flu season to reduce the severity of a second wave.

Recommendation 13: Rough sleepers

- A. Develop a sustainable approach that delivers the same results keeping rough sleepers off the street. Requesting and lobbying government for funding, including through London Councils.
- B. 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
- C. The Council and its partners should map the increase in referrals and where they came from as well as the paths individuals subsequently took
- D. Develop a sustainable approach to support those with No Recourse for Public Funds and lobby government to ensure this group is not left at risk.

Recommendation 14: Domestic Violence Support

Proactively communicate using a range of channels and community languages the support available for victims of domestic violence and ensure resource is planned to meet potential increase in demand.

Recommendation 15: Care Homes

That the Health Scrutiny Committee undertake a review of learning of the response to the pandemic by engaging care homes, residents' families

and other stakeholders to identify long term recommendations for improvement.

Recommendation 16: Recovery for children

The recovery programme for children in Tower Hamlets should include the input of specialist teachers. Emphasise not just on 'catch up' but on the social-emotional needs of young people, especially vulnerable children and those with SEND to ensure a successful transition back to school. Schools should be engaged to identify curriculum and attainment gaps are and what additional tuition and after school clubs could be conducted to address this.

Recommendation 17: Free School Meals

That Children's and Education Sub-committee review the implications for the Council's Universal Free School Meals programme for infant children.

Recommendation 18: Mental health support

Young people are more likely to be affected by COVID-19 with anxiety and depression, with factors such as security, housing security and living quality related to the increase.

A. Ensure effective signposting to services such as housing and benefits as quickly as possible.

B. Establish a mental health partnership put in place to co-ordinate remedial plans across relevant sectors like education and housing

4. COMMENTS OF THE CHIEF FINANCE OFFICER

4.1 The report produced by the OS Committee reflects the financial position at a point in time and government support has subsequently increased from the c£19m referenced. In addition, a Local Outbreak Fund is now in operation and compensation for the loss of certain Sales Fees and Charges has also been agreed.

4.2 Unless recommendations can be funded through the existing resources of the Council and its partner organisations any actions will need to consider the need to seek additional budget provision through the Council's budget setting process.

5. LEGAL COMMENTS

5.1 The recommendations set out in this report are within the Council's general powers.

5.2 Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 requires the council, in the exercise of its functions, to have due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination and other unlawful conduct, advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not (the public sector equality duty). The Council has complied with this duty and has taken all necessary steps to ensure that it properly

understands how the challenges and opportunities set out in this report affects people who have protected characteristics and to understand the needs of people.

Linked Reports, Appendices and Background Documents

Linked Report

- NONE.

Local Government Act, 1972 Section 100D (As amended)

List of “Background Papers” used in the preparation of this report

- NONE

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