Non Executive Decision of the: **GPC** 6 October 2020	TOWER HAMLETS
Report of: Asmat Hussain, Corporate Director, Governance and Monitoring Officer	**Classification:** Unrestricted
Strengthening Local Democracy – Councillor Support Framework- Second performance update	

Originating Officer(s)	Onyekachi Ajisafe, Strategy and Policy Officer Afazul Hoque, Head of Corporate Strategy and Policy
Wards affected	All wards
Strategic Plan Priority / Outcome	Priority 3: A dynamic outcomes-based Council using digital innovation and partnership working to respond to the changing needs of our borough. Outcome 9: People say we are open and transparent putting residents at the heart of everything we do.

Executive Summary

This report provides an update on the delivery of the council's Councillor Support Framework. It is the second performance update since the framework was approved by General Purposes Committee in June 2019. It covers the period up to September 2020 and highlights additional progress made since the first update in February 2020. This includes activities services have undertaken in response to the COVID-19 pandemic that arose during this time.

Recommendations:

The General Purpose Committee is recommended to:

1. Consider and comment on implementation of the Councillor Support Framework attached as Appendix 1 to this report.

1   REASONS FOR THE DECISIONS

1.1   This report follows the decision of the General Purposes Committee for the Corporate Director, Governance, to report back to the Committee on progress of the Councillor Support Framework every six months.

2   ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

2.1   To do nothing. This is not recommended as the framework sets out a number of proposals to enable ward councillors to improve engagement at a local level. Reviewing performance will ensure these proposals are implemented.

3   DETAILS OF THE REPORT

3.1   The Councillor Support Framework supports Ward Councillors with their broader engagement activities. This enables Councillors to play their role in the community beyond the Town Hall and ensure consistent support from officers. This work supports the Council's transparency, accountability, community engagement and cohesion priorities as outlined in the Strategic Plan, Tower Hamlets Plan and Transparency Protocol – A Transparent Mayor, an Open Council.

3.2   The framework was developed by the Strengthening Local Democracy task, and finish group and brought together the activities in place to support Councillors, alongside a series of proposals of what more could be done. The Councillor Support Framework was adopted by General Purposes Committee on 25 June 2019.

3.3   It was agreed by General Purposes Committee that the Corporate Director, Governance would retain oversight for the implementation of the framework and was to report back to the Committee on progress every six months. This is the second performance report on progress of the framework and covers the period up to September 2020.

3.4   Further good progress has been made on implementing the Councillor Support Framework despite services having to focus their efforts towards responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. 67 per cent of the actions have been completed to date (9 per cent higher than reported in February).

        Pandemic reflections
3.5   COVID-19 has had a significant impact on the Council's day to day business and required it change the way it delivers services. The Council response to the pandemic has required extensive partnership working with local organisations, residents and councillors acting as a key catalyst for providing information and support to some of the borough's most vulnerable residents. Some of highlights of support to councillors and joint working during this period include:
   - Prioritised the roll-out of new laptops and software to all councillors to enable them to take full advantage of the new tools available such as MS Teams.
   - Set up a temporary Urgent Member Enquiry system so that those cases could still receive attention when the main system was suspended to allow officers to prioritise work at the height of the pandemic.
   - Supported councillors as they transitioned to virtual meetings including providing additional training and practice sessions on the new technology.

- Ensured the smooth termination of physical councillor advice surgeries with notices posted online and (where required) at venues. Work is now underway to evaluate the Covid-19 security of surgery venues.
- Have worked to bring Councillor Briefings and Councillor Learning and Development sessions to MS Teams which has resulted in increased attendance from Councillor who no longer have to travel to the town hall to attend.
- Made full use of the Members Bulletin and emails to keep Members updated on activity and issues related to Covid-19, this included daily updates in the early stages of the pandemic.
- Timely coronavirus-related content and updates on the Council's website.
- Supported the Mayor and Cabinet Members' visits to emergency food hubs.
- A Covid-19 checklist has been prepared for the Speaker to ensure the safety of the Speaker (and Attendant) at any physical events they are invited to.
- Ward councillors engaged with local food hubs to raise awareness and in some cases delivery of food to vulnerable residents.

3.6 A detailed report setting out the Council's response to pandemic was presented to Cabinet in June 2002 which included;
- offering support to rough sleepers
- Food, medical and other support to vulnerable residents, shielding residents and those self-isolating residents
- Delivering food and PPE equipment
- Developing new idea store memberships online and access to resources
- Delivering books to support home-schooling of key worker's children
- Providing free school meals
- Engaging local volunteers to support delivery of council and community services
- Co-ordinating the provision of business rates relief, rent relief, and grants.

3.7 All councillors have a key role in the recovery of the borough and any future waves of the pandemic. This will be supported through their formal roles in committees, engagement with councillors in their area. It will also be important to build on new ways of working and opportunities the pandemic has presented such as delivering services differently and improving communication.

3.8 Additionally, the Council has had to quickly adapt the way we hold Members meetings and has implemented remote Member-level meetings without the need for participants to be physically present. These virtual meetings support residents' accessibility, as they can still make petitions and deputations. However, it raises some challenges as residents cannot be present to attend these meetings. The Council is exploring what is technologically available to mitigate this, as well as researching what other boroughs are doing regarding engaging with residents for Members meetings.

3.9 Some of the deadlines of actions still in progress have been revised because of the impact the pandemic has had on services. If there is a second wave of the pandemic this is also likely to have another impact on deadlines being

met, and as such will be kept under review. On some of these actions we've put new deadlines which have longer timescales than would have been originally expected in anticipation of the impact of a potential second wave of the pandemic.

3.10   Following discussions with the Divisional Director for Youth and Commissioning, Divisional Director of Children's Social Care, Interim Head of Youth Service and Principal Social Worker, one high level action to improve engagement with schools, children and young people has been broken down into three detailed actions referring to the Takeover Challenge, Democracy Week and Practice Week. Alongside the existing children and schools-related activities in the framework, this provides clarity on Children's Services' activities to promote Member engagement with children and young people, as well as the wider community. The chart below shows the reported progress against the 73 actions in the framework (previously 71). In order to ensure consistency in the reporting of the status of key milestones, the following criteria have been applied:

- **Completed –** where the key milestone has been achieved
- **In Progress –** where the key milestone will be achieved by the deadlines
- **Overdue –** where the key milestone has not been completed by the deadline date

3.11   Additionally, in order to show progress made on the last performance update in February 2020, the previous updates have also been included beside the new updates in Appendix 1 attached.

Councillor Support Framework Overall Progress
- Completed/Ongoing: 67%
- In Progress: 30%
- Overdue: 3%
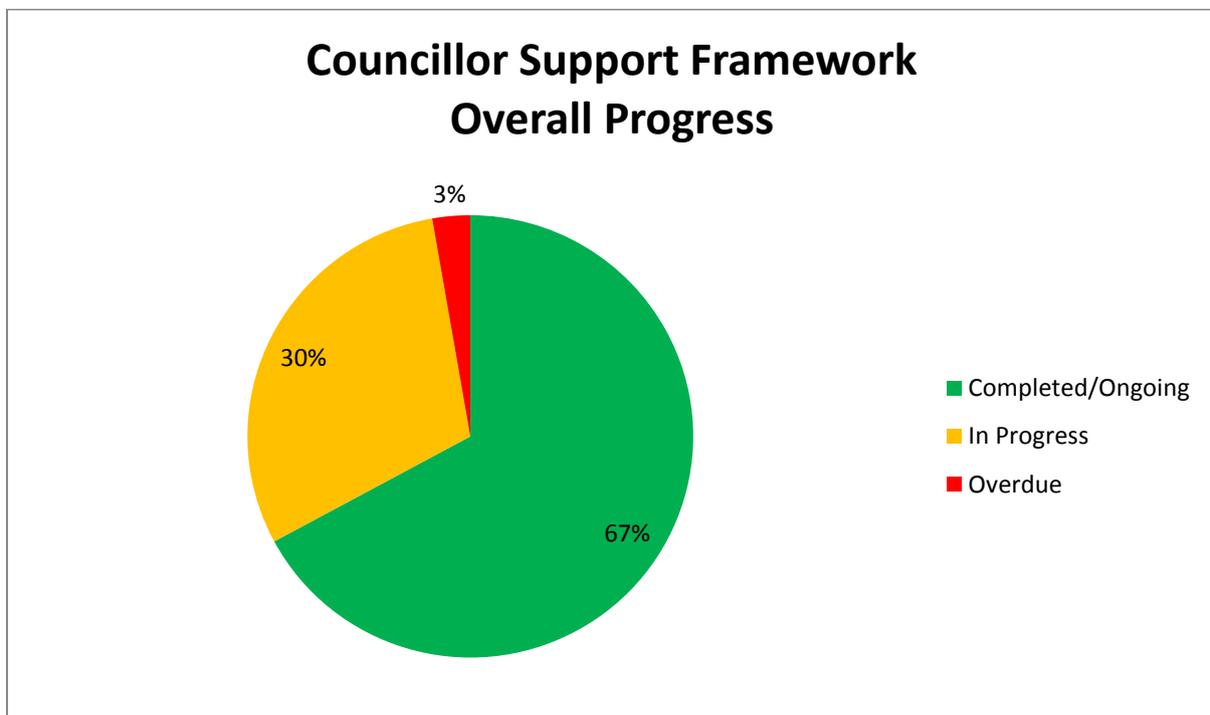
3.12   Some highlights from the Performance Report (attached as Appendix 1).

Completed	In progress (by the end of this year)	Overdue
VAWG training held for Members	Formal Councillor Call for Action (CCfA)	Training on the education system and engagement with schools
Series of Scrutiny training sessions held	Members spotlights to promote the role of ward Councillors	Training and information on managing service user expectation
Members took part in Practice Week this year	Review methods of communicating with Members	
Participation and engagement plan is in place	Use of consultation hub to feed into the Overview and Scrutiny work programme	
Communications Plan around the Framework delivered		
Housing Association contact details published		
List of Residents' Associations and Tenant Management groups published		
SEND parent / carer forum / YP Forum held virtually which a Member attended		
Planning Statement of Community Involvement updated		
Overview and Scrutiny Toolkit revised		
Member attended Holiday Childcare scheme this summer		
Member attended the OurTime Youth Forum		
Awareness raising at Senior Leadership Team meeting		
Ward Walkabouts piloted		
Councillor involvement in Ward Panels has been promoted and encouraged		
Consultation Handbook launched		
Wide ranging engagement on Local Infrastructure Fund held		
Young Mayor Programme		

4   EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

4.1   The Councillor Support Framework enables ward councillors to better engage
       with all sectors of their communities. This will have a positive equalities impact
       as existing and new arrangements are strengthened and improved.

5   OTHER STATUTORY IMPLICATIONS

5.1   This section of the report is used to highlight further specific statutory
       implications that are either not covered in the main body of the report or are
       required to be highlighted to ensure decision makers give them proper
       consideration. Examples of other implications may be:
       - Best Value Implications,
       - Consultations,
       - Environmental (including air quality),
       - Risk Management,
       - Crime Reduction,
       - Safeguarding.
       - Data Protection / Privacy Impact Assessment.

6   COMMENTS OF THE CHIEF FINANCE OFFICER

6.1   There are no financial implications arising from the content of this report. If the
       findings of the recommendation give rise to actions which have financial
       consequences, officers will then be obliged to seek appropriate approval
       through the Council's financial approval process.

7   COMMENTS OF LEGAL SERVICES

7.1   There are no specific legal implications arising out of the contents of this
       report

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Linked Reports, Appendices and Background Documents
- Strengthening Local Democracy, report to General Purposes Committee, 25
  June 2019
- Strengthening Local Democracy, performance update report to General
  Purposes Committee, 25 February 2020

Linked Report
- NONE

Appendices
- Appendix 1 – Councillor Support Framework progress to September 2020

**Background Documents – Local Authorities (Executive Arrangements)(Access
to Information)(England) Regulations 2012**

- NONE

Officer contact details for documents:
Onyekachi Ajisafe, onyekachi.ajisafe@towerhamlets.gov.uk