

Overview and Scrutiny Annual Report 2020-21

26/04/2021



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Chair's Foreword

I am pleased to present the Overview and Scrutiny Committee's (OSC) Annual Report for 2020-21. This report provides a summary of the work the committee delivered over the 2020-21 municipal year.

The Covid-19 pandemic compelled the council to change and adapt its services and redeploy resources to support the local emergency response to the pandemic. Despite the challenge of the crisis, at Tower Hamlets Council, our Overview and Scrutiny function continues to be an active and integral part of the council's governance arrangements and remains a critical friend to the development and implementation of key council policies.

As with many of the council services, the OSC and its sub-committees adapted its work programme to accommodate the response to the pandemic. We held scrutiny meetings virtually to meet the government's social distancing measures. Despite the challenge, the committee agreed to have an overarching Covid-19 theme given the significance of the pandemic and its impact.

This theme was reflected in our spotlight sessions on waste performance, WorkPath services, anti-social behaviour (ASB), domestic abuse and improving resident engagement in addition to our standing items the budget monitoring and strategic performance.

The committee received regular Covid-19 updates from the council's director of Public Health on infection rates, hospitalisation and deaths and mental health. Equally, we have seen how the strong partnership working between the local authority and community groups came together to support residents, delivering on the vaccination programme and support for businesses and communities.

Our sub-committee members also focussed on the impact of the pandemic on children's and young people's education, poverty, adults social isolation and mental health, adult learning disability, rough sleepers and homelessness. We also examined in detail the council budget for 2021-22 along with the MTFS 2021-24 as we felt that there would be long-lasting challenges resulting from the council's proposed budget.

These are very difficult times for the council and local government. As we gradually move away from lockdown measures and both businesses and communities begin to open up their doors, we continue to be cautiously optimistic in our roadmap to recovery. The next twelve months will bring further challenges and we will continue to collaborate to meet these challenges head on.

I would like to thank the committee Members, officers and partners who have contributed and supported scrutiny during the year. I hope this report helps you to understand the work and value of scrutiny and that it enthruses to get involved.

**Cllr James King,
Chair, Overview and Scrutiny Committee
London Borough of Tower Hamlets**



Overview and Scrutiny in Tower Hamlets 2020-21

Membership

Scrutiny Committees

For 2020-21, OSC remains the principle Member-led body, which holds the executive decision makers to account through providing the critical friend challenge on issues of strategic importance. To support this arrangement OSC continues with three sub-committees and two scrutiny leads covering portfolio area. These include:

Committee	Role
Overview & Scrutiny Committee	
OSC's terms of reference can be found here: OSC Terms of Reference	
Councillor James King	Chair
Councillor Bex White	Vice Chair & Scrutiny Lead for Children and Education
Councillor Gabriela Salva-Macallan	Scrutiny Lead for Health and Adults
Councillor Ehtasham Haque	Scrutiny Lead for Housing and Regeneration
Councillor Leema Qureshi	Scrutiny Lead for Finance & Resources
Councillor Faroque Ahmed	Scrutiny Lead for Environment & Community Safety
Councillor Marc Francis	Scrutiny Member
Councillor Denise Jones	Scrutiny Member
Councillor Andrew Wood	Scrutiny Member
Halima Islam	Co-opted Member
James Wilson	Co-opted Member
Health & Adults Sub-Committee	
Health & Adults Scrutiny Sub-Committee's terms of reference can be found here: Health & Adults Scrutiny Sub-Committee Terms of Reference	
Councillor Gabriela Salva Macallan	Chair
Councillor Mohammed Pappu	Vice Chair
Councillor Denise Jones	Scrutiny Member
Councillor Shad Chowdhury	Scrutiny Member
Councillor Shah Ameen	Scrutiny Member
Councillor Andrew Wood	Scrutiny Member
David Burbidge	Co-opted Member
Sue Kenten	Co-opted Member
Children & Education Scrutiny Sub-Committee	

Children & Education Scrutiny Sub-Committee's terms of reference can be found here: Children and Education Scrutiny Terms of Reference	
Councillor Bex White	Chair
Dr Phillip Rice	Vice Chair & Co-opted Member
Councillor Gabriela Salva-Macallan	Scrutiny Member
Councillor Mohammed Pappu	Scrutiny Member
Councillor Kyrsten Perry	Scrutiny Member
Councillor Helal Uddin	Scrutiny Member
Councillor Victoria Obaze	Scrutiny Member
Councillor Andrew Wood	Scrutiny Member
Neil Cunningham	Co-opted Member
Joanna Hannan	Co-opted Member
Ahmed Hussain	Co-opted Member
Housing & Regeneration Scrutiny Sub-Committee	
Housing & Regeneration Scrutiny Sub-Committee's terms of reference can be found here: Housing and Regeneration Scrutiny Sub-Committee Terms of Reference	
Councillor Ehtasham Haque	Chair
Councillor Marc Francis	Vice Chair
Councillor Amina Ali	Scrutiny Member
Councillor Dipa Das	Scrutiny Member
Councillor Helal Uddin	Scrutiny Member
Councillor Andrew Wood	Scrutiny Member
Ann Ambrose	Co-opted Member
Moshin Hamim	Co-opted Member

1. Overview and Scrutiny Committee

- 1.1. OSC is the main, member led body that holds executive decision makers to account. OSC meets monthly and consists of nine elected councillors, along with two co-opted members ([OSC Papers](#)).
- 1.2. This municipal year, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee (OSC) accepted that the Covid-19 pandemic would significantly impact council services. The work programme considered how Members can best support the council and residents during the crisis, and lead on local-led scrutiny of the operational response.
- 1.3. The OSC began its scrutiny of the council's response to Covid-19 in April 2020 and culminated in the committee's review of the council's Covid-19 response in September 2020 ([Covid Report and Action Plan](#)). Programme scrutiny meetings re-commenced from June starting with a Covid-19 briefing for the committee with the Director of Public Health.

Scrutiny Work Programme

- 1.4. The 2020-21 [scrutiny work programme](#) was developed and agreed after the new municipal year commenced and the new scrutiny committees were established in September 2020.

Covid-19 pandemic updates

- 1.5. As a committee, we agreed to have oversight of the Covid-19 pandemic as this would have some bearing on scrutiny work programme. At each meeting, the committee received the latest Covid-19 intelligence from the council's Director and Public Health on matters including, infection rates, health inequalities and disparities, hospitalisation, deaths, vaccination, test trace and isolation provision, lockdowns and managing further breakout of the infection. The committee was able to contextualise the impact and this helped to frame some of the other work programme topics.

Waste Service – Spotlight

- 1.6. In October 2020, the committee was keen to understand how the [waste management service](#) performed since being brought 'in house' in March 2020. Members had particular interest and focus on:

- Street cleanliness;
- fly tipping;
- frequency of missed bin collections;
- the impact of the pandemic on service delivery; and
- complaints handling procedures.

The committee pressed the service to clarify the measures used to report performance, improve its service information to residents and challenged the service to better understand resident behaviour. This theme that was further explored at a challenge session in September 2020 on report. [Click here for report](#)

Budget

- 1.7. In January 2021, the council's [budget](#) for 2021- 22 together with the MTFs 2021-24 was scrutinised. Eight recommendations to check and challenge the council's approach were made.

Whilst the committee accepted the council's need to maintain its reserves to avoid facing issues that other local authorities have encountered in these challenging times, the importance of scrutinising the council's proposed savings and to question the rationale behind some of the reserves proposals was recognised.

ASB and Borough Commander Spotlight

- 1.8. In January 2021, the committee turned its attention to other, non-Covid-19 matters of importance to residents and the borough including reviewing the effectiveness of the partnership response anti-social behaviour ([ASB](#)).

The committee raised resident's concerns on lack of clarity for reporting ASB matters. The committee also heard that substance misuse remains one of the main drivers of ASB demand.

- 1.9. The committee also heard from the [Borough Commander](#) who outlined his priorities for the Borough Commander Unit (BCU) this year and included the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic policing response, tackling increased levels of drugs and ASB and the efforts of Operation Continuum, street and youth based violence, burglary, and public protection. Resident issues on 101 reporting, Section 60 powers and the community response to this were questioned.

Resident Engagement

- 1.10. In November 2020, the committee raised the issue of [resident engagement](#), and particularly reaching out to the 'seldom-heard' or the under-represented in the borough. Accordingly, it is important to find out how to reach them and often it will be (i) partner organisation; (ii) the resident route; (iii) or that they already part of a certain community that is the best way to get the content out. The committee plans to undertake a challenge session in April 2021, building on the resident engagement topic and examining how resident structures can be used to influence and shape - place based priorities

Call-ins

- 1.11. The council's constitution permits all Members to call-in executive decisions before they are implemented, and the process requires that an OSC meeting is convened to consider a decision which is called-in by other Members/ Councillors. This year there have been two call-ins regarding the decisions on:

- Amendments to the Council's Housing Allocations Scheme
- Outcome of consultation on revised approach to day support in adult social care

- 1.12. On both occasions, OSC resolved that the decisions be referred for reconsideration. The Mayor reconsidered parts of the original decision on the council's housing allocation policy and made changes to the recommendation regarding existing social housing tenants under the age of 50. There were no changes to the call-in of the decision on day support.

- 1.13. A further call-in on the consultation of the council's BAME Commission is scheduled for the end of the municipal year.

2. Health and Adults Scrutiny Sub-Committee

- 2.1. The Health and Adults Scrutiny Sub-Committee held three meetings during 2020-21. These took place in 23 Jul 2020, 1 Dec 2020, 8 Feb 2021 ([Papers](#)).
- 2.2. This year, the sub-committee focussed on the current pandemic (Covid-19) and the impact it's had on the adult's services provision within the borough. There was a concentration on the partnership's response to key issues that came through the Covid-19 pandemic including mental health and health inequalities and disparities in service provision. The sub-committee heard from a wide range of evidence from stakeholders providing frontline response to the pandemic including local NHS commissioners for health and social care, Barts Health, East London Foundation Trust, GP Care Group, Community and Voluntary Sector and Healthwatch.

Covid-19 Response

- 2.3. In July 2020, the Director of Public Health for Tower Hamlets (along with partners) presented to the sub-committee its approach to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic and entailed developing a [Local Covid-19 Outbreak Management Plan](#).
- 2.4. The plan to address prevention and ongoing management of outbreaks in the borough was scrutinised. It was felt that there needed to be a particular emphasis for high risk settings including care homes, schools and places of worship. The sub-committee further examined the response of partners' approach to local test and trace system, shielding the most vulnerable and how Black, Asian Minority Ethnic groups are being supported during the pandemic.
- 2.5. The sub-committee were concerned on the impact on people's mental health and wellbeing and heard how this is significantly affecting some of resident groups. East London Foundation Trust who specialise in mental health presented their views and experiences during the first lockdown phase of the pandemic.

Covid-19 Impact on Care Homes

- 2.6. The sub-committee also reviewed the report on the state of care homes and its impact on both residents and staff during this pandemic. Whilst the council and its partners response has been encouraging the sub-committee learned that the report findings showed varying experiences across the borough's five care homes.

The sub-committee also heard from service users directly impacted from the pandemic who raised concerns regarding the loss of life within care homes. The sub-committee expects that partners will learn lessons from this difficult period and ensure the right level of resources and support is afforded to protect the most vulnerable.

Review of Test Trace and Isolation Programme

- 2.7. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee requested for the sub-committee (at its December meeting) to review the performance and effectiveness of the [local test, trace and isolation programme](#). It was recommended to maintain and resource local shielding pathways for vulnerable people during the winter months and with the potential second wave of Covid-19.

- 2.8. The sub-committee further noted that legislation introduced by the Coronavirus Act 2020 facilitated amendments to parts of the Care Act 2014, as support to local authorities on easing some Adult Social Care statutory duties. The purpose behind this was to help local authorities manage the impact of the pandemic on the increase in demand for adult social care services with a reduced workforce. The potential risks of application of easement and how the council looks to mitigate those risks was examined.
- 2.9. The sub-committee also received a joint presentation from the council and Tower Hamlet's Clinical Commissioning Group focussing on proposals for their winter plans to maintain service provision throughout winter season and support measures for controlling the pandemic. It was recommended that partners should consider if winter plans can be integrated through collaborative commissioning.

3. Children and Education Scrutiny Sub-Committee

- 3.1. The Children and Education Scrutiny Sub-Committee held three meetings during this municipal year. These took place in August, December 2020 & February 2021. ([Papers](#))
- 3.2. Our sub-committee mainly focussed on the current Covid-19 pandemic and the impact this had on children and families. As a sub-committee, we agreed to have a dedicated space on the agenda to allow the sub-committee to hear from a variety of stakeholders on the front line of the response. This included schools, police, health colleagues and others on the front line supporting the pandemic response.

Impact of Covid-19

- 3.3. In August 2020, the sub-committee heard from the Cabinet Member for Children and Schools alongside the corporate director of Children and Culture on the overall [impact of Covid-19](#) pandemic on children and their families.
- 3.4. It also heard about the challenges and opportunities over the next 12 months including the financial pressures for the council and the implications for Children's Social Care, Early Help and the impact on education and Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). The Sub-committee noted that overall, the physical, mental, and social repercussions of Covid-19 go far beyond the virus itself. It was recognised that the impact of Covid-19 upon local young people and their families has been an experience of isolation; pressure of high anxiety; and for some of an increased safeguarding risk.
- 3.5. The sub-committee noted that Covid-19 had shone a light on inequalities, and we were informed that these could be exacerbated further and leading to poorer outcomes for residents, higher demands for support with special education needs and social care and an increase in financial pressures on the Council. The sub-committee also heard that the impact of the pandemic on the first financial quarter of this year had been considerable as the social care demand rises as children go back the school.

Pandemic Impact on Education and Children's learning

- 3.6. In December 2020, the sub-committee heard from a local primary and secondary school headteacher together with the executive director for Tower Hamlets Education

Partnership on the impact of Covid-19 on education in the borough the steps taken to minimise disruption to children and the support provided to schools.

- 3.7. In February 2021, the sub-committee received an update on the impact of Covid-19 on education in the borough particularly on [children's learning](#) and the steps taken to minimize disruption to children and the support provided to schools.

It heard that schools worked tirelessly to meet the dual demands of having children of critical workers and vulnerable children in school as well as developing and running online learning packages for children at home. It also heard that secondary schools had to establish testing programmes for pupils and that lack of digital access and broadband also impacted on individual students.

- 3.8. We further heard on how Tower Hamlets Education Partnership had supported and shared good practice which had been invaluable in ensuring schools and pupils were well equipped with digital solutions, to narrow the gap between disadvantaged groups. The sub-committee examined and questioned plans to manage any long-term impact of the lockdown.

Food Provision for Vulnerable Families

- 3.9. The sub-committee heard that the pandemic intensified the challenge to ensure children do not go hungry, especially when out of school and that [vital food support](#) became critical during the pandemic whilst work was ongoing with the voluntary sector and other providers to ensure networks, such as schools could play a key role in tackling food hunger.
- 3.10. The Cabinet Member for Children and Schools informed the sub-committee that during the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic there were variety of provisions that offered free school meals support with various government schemes. The sub-committee noted that the government now issued a block grant to support vulnerable families during term time as well as during school holidays, allowing Councils to provide targeted support to vulnerable families.
- 3.11. The council's Tackling Poverty Coordinator provided statistical information to the sub-committee on the number of people claiming benefits and the impact Covid-19 was having on vulnerable families and individuals. This included a number of households now claiming Universal Credit in Tower Hamlets that had risen quite significantly. It also heard from Bow Food Bank who underlined that there was an increase in demand for their service from vulnerable families.

4. Housing & Regeneration Scrutiny Sub-Committee

- 4.1. The Housing and Regeneration Scrutiny Sub-Committee held three meetings during this municipal year on July, November 2020 and February 2021. A final meeting is expected to take place in April 2021. ([Papers](#))
- 4.2. Our sub-committee also examined the impact of Covid -19 and the council's and partner's response to the pandemic on housing and regeneration issues.

Responding Rough Sleeping – during Covid-19

- 4.3. In July 2020, the sub-committee focussed its energy on the council's response to Covid-19 Pandemic and we reviewed the council's response to [rough sleeping](#) during the pandemic and the impact of Covid-19 on private rented sector. Specifically, as the governments directive required all rough sleepers and those at risk of rough sleeping had to be accommodated to facilitate social distancing/self-isolation, regardless of priority need, local connection, or recourse to public funds.
- 4.4. The sub-committee heard that over 200 individuals had been supported by the council with emergency accommodation within commercial hotels. Most being from Tower Hamlets with over 40 that have no recourse to public funds. Individuals were accommodated under Housing Act 1996 s.188(1) duty and Housing Act 1996 s.205(3) statutory powers, and Localism Act 2011.

(Health and Welfare)

- 4.5. The sub-committee examined and noted that council's commissioned 24/7 on-site and floating support for rough sleepers within the commercial hotels as rough sleepers have complex needs. The value of these arrangements has been shown by the relatively low number of evictions and abandonments from the hotels and the low rough sleeping numbers during the first three months of the lockdown. It also heard how Public Health provided support in implementing an operation plan to minimise the risk of an outbreak and spread of infection.
- 4.6. The sub-committee also heard how the council used the opportunity to provide support to rough sleepers onsite to access substance dependence treatment.
- 4.7. The sub-committee heard about the challenges around managing costs, funding and moving onto the next phase of accommodating rough sleepers, whilst reviewing how improvements to the customer journey could be achieved to prevent and relieve homelessness in light of Covid-19. The level of support given to the private rented sector as a result of the pandemic was scrutinised too. We identified key issues for the recovery phase that will need to be explored further including evictions, rent arrears and private rental market.

Social Landlords Performance

- 4.8. In November 2020, the sub-committee reviewed its standing agenda item on the [performance of social landlords](#) in the borough and received a summary of the achievements and challenges for the quarterly performance data on 14 registered providers (RPs) within the borough as well as an update on the work of the Tower Hamlets Housing Forum Benchmarking Group.

It also heard from one of the registered providers, whilst efforts were made to improve their performance, we challenged whether this could delivered as failure to deliver on similar promises of service improvement that had been made in the past. The feedback received from residents who reported difficulties in securing needed repairs and problems with customer service and communication was highlighted. Consequently, it was recommended officers to explore if a KPI could be introduced to measure effective communication between RPs and residents.

Homeless Reduction Act

- 4.9. The sub-committee heard from the council’s divisional director for Housing and Regeneration on the report which made a series of practical recommendations for the housing options service following a scrutiny challenge session in March 2020. The proposed recommendations were scrutinised and further questioned whether they were challenging enough to deliver tangible improvements for service users.

The sub-committee also recommended a resumed/ additional challenge session to re-explore the matters raised in the report and draft new recommendations. The sub-committee approved in February 2021 for submission to the executive.

- 4.10. Overall, the sub-committee examined seven areas of its portfolio and made the following recommendations:

- to write to the Mayor and the cabinet member for housing to highlight the sub-committee’s concerns with the performance data available to it on registered providers;
- to consider recent resident feedback provided to councillors that indicated poor customer experience for those accessing the council’s housing options service, while noting the work underway to tackle this; and
- to consider a future challenge session on regeneration activity.

5. Scrutiny Lead for Finance and Resources

- 5.1. The scrutiny lead for Finance and Resources holds regular meetings with the Cabinet Member for Resources and Voluntary Sector and corporate director for Resources to scrutinise the portfolio area and the issues and challenge that council faces. The Scrutiny lead also represents the Overview and Scrutiny Committee at the Grant Determination Sub-Committee which the Mayor chairs and allows scrutiny to examine some of the grant funding request proposals.

Challenge Session on Examining the council’s revised approach to Idea stores and library services

- 5.2. In January 2021, we held a scrutiny challenge session on examining council’s revised approach for [Idea stores and library services](#). The scrutiny committee wanted to understand how the proposals would impact particular service user groups, insights from public engagement and review the council’s five-year vision for the future of Idea stores. The challenge session itself fed into the council’s consultation on the topic.
- 5.3. The challenge session facilitated the discussion and allow the scrutiny committee to make eight recommendation which are listed below:

Recommendation 1	The council to provide more comprehensive information on its five-year vision for the future of Idea Stores and library services. This needs to include a full review of staffing levels to maintain services and publish further detailed information on the future site use of Watney Market Idea Store and Bethnal Green Library. It needs to examine how library
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	services can be supplemented by other council services and further consult residents on how proposed reduction of hours will be tailored to meet local demand.
Recommendation 2	The council to revisit its proposed plan for the Isle of Dogs library service and consider the merits of deprioritising Canary Wharf (as this is subject to future closure) to free up resources to sustain Cubitt Town Library Service in the interim until such time a new alternative site is opened.
Recommendation 3	The council to review and bring up to date its Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA) for all Idea Stores and library services to help comprehend the impact on protected characteristic groups.
Recommendation 4	To further undertake comprehensive risk assessments to help understand the impact of change on wider determinants including; delayed recovery and continuation of the pandemic, impact on footfall and local economy, increase in demand user groups, impact on children and young people’s educational outcomes, level of social deprivation, poverty, social isolation, crime and antisocial behaviour and community tension/ cohesion.
Recommendation 5	The council to review the use of Idea Stores and library service’s spaces so that youth hubs can offer dedicated spaces for children and young people to use for their education and social connection needs.
Recommendation 6	The council to investigate and publish the results into the research it’s undertaken for alternative / external funding streams. This must include a review of its application of fund streams such as Public Health or New Homes Bonus (earmarked for reserves), that could be aligned to a longer consultation period for examining the future delivery model of Idea Stores and library services whilst undertaking further assessments on the geography of sites being considered along with the economic impact on people.
Recommendation 7	The council to investigate and publish results of how it can develop revenue streams from commercialisation of the Idea Stores and library service’s physical premises and its digitalisation agenda to offset some of the savings requirements and future proof the sustainability of Idea Stores and library services.
Recommendation 8	The council to market and publicise the commercialisation of the Idea Stores and library services (using its communication channels and advertising space) and to include engagement with different media groups including Bangladeshi Language Media, Social Media Influencers and others to help it achieve a wider reach for business opportunities and revenue growth.

- 5.4. The Challenge session highlighted the impact that the council’s proposal would have if implemented. Subsequently, the council had taken on board some of the scrutiny recommendations and adjusted its original proposal with no closures and whilst increasing the hours for Idea stores or library services to enable better access.

6. Scrutiny Lead for Environment and Community Safety

- 6.1. The scrutiny lead for Environment and Community Safety engaged with cabinet members, council officers and partners to develop the agenda items discussed at OSC

including; domestic abuse, borough commander spotlight and partnership approach to anti-social behaviour.

Challenge Session – Performance towards air quality commitments and residents’ health outcomes

6.2. At the end of March 2021, we held a scrutiny challenge session to assess the performance and progress of the council’s air quality commitments. This also took into account other council objectives including:

- the Anti-idling Policy, Open Space Strategy;
- Air Quality Action Plan, Liveable Streets Programme;
- Transport strategy;
- Net Zero Carbon Plan (only commitments relating to air quality); and
- Parking Policy.

Our aim was to examine further the effectiveness of these towards health outcomes of residents in Tower Hamlets and consider whether these commitments go far enough.

6.3. The challenge session’s focus led the scrutiny committee to make a number of recommendations (which will be published within the scrutiny challenge session report) with a view to influencing improvements and help to inform the on-going work on council’s air quality activities and plans. The recommendations are: