

LONDON BOROUGH OF TOWER HAMLETS

MINUTES OF THE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

HELD AT 6.31 P.M. ON MONDAY, 21 FEBRUARY 2022

**ROOM C1, 1ST FLOOR, TOWN HALL, MULBERRY PLACE, 5 CLOVE
CRESCENT, LONDON, E14 2BG**

Members Present:

Councillor Mohammed Pappu (Chair)
Councillor Bex White (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Faroque Ahmed – Scrutiny Lead for Community Safety
Councillor Marc Francis
Councillor Denise Jones
Councillor Gabriela Salva Macallan – Scrutiny Lead for Health and Adults
Councillor Leema Qureshi – Scrutiny Lead for Resources and Finance
Councillor Andrew Wood

Co-opted Members Present:

Halima Islam – Co-Optee

Other Councillors Present:

Councillor Asma Begum
Councillor Rachel Blake
Councillor Asma Islam
Councillor Candida Ronald

Apologies:

Councillor Ehtasham Haque – Scrutiny Lead for Housing and Regeneration

Officers Present:

Musrat Zaman – (Director of HR, OD & Business Support Services)
Catherine Cooke – (Contract Development Manager)
Dan Jones – (Director, Public Realm)
Joseph Lacey-Holland – (Senior Strategy Policy & Performance Officer)
Michael McHugh – (Associate Director of Public Health)
Judith St John – (Director, Commissioning and Culture, Children's Services)
Richard Williams – Business Manager Operational PR
Denise Radley – (Corporate Director, Health, Adults &

Community)

1. DECLARATIONS OF DISCLOSABLE PECUNIARY INTEREST AND OTHER INTERESTS

The following Member for transparency declared a potential interest in relation to:

1. **Item 9 Pre-Decision Scrutiny Questions** Councillor Marc Francis due to his wife Councillor Rachel Blake being the Deputy Mayor and Cabinet Member for Adults, Health, and Wellbeing.

2. ACTION LOG

The Committee **noted** that it had received the response regarding the Liveable Streets recommendations as detailed in the Action Log.

In addition, it was noted that there were the following action log items:

- ❖ A breakdown of the recent Autumn Budget and Spending Review announcement and the projected implications for Tower Hamlets.
- ❖ A report on the review of Leisure Centres that was to be provided to the Committee; and
- ❖ A written note to be provided with an explanation as to why the decision to agree the extension of AEG was not considered to be a key decision.

3. REQUESTS TO SUBMIT PETITIONS

Nil items.

4. FORTHCOMING DECISIONS

The Committee **noted** Cabinet forward plan as of 16th November 2021 and that for the most up to date version, Members were recommended to check the Cabinet web pages on the [council's website](#).

5. UNRESTRICTED REPORTS 'CALLED IN'

Nil Items.

6. SCRUTINY SPOTLIGHT

6.1 BAME Commission Action Plan

The Committee reviewed and noted the progress of the Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Inequalities Commission action plan, and considered the impact of the actions in addressing race inequality within the Council's workforce. The main points raised because of questioning summarised as follows:

The Committee:

- ❖ **Noted** that LBTH has been developing an ambitious programme of activities which will have a real impact on outcomes for residents and provided a step change for addressing longer term challenges and highlighted by the Commission and agreed by Cabinet in October 2021 with a committed to fund over £1.5 million to deliver on the actions that represented one of the biggest investments and intervention by any local authority to address race inequality.
- ❖ **Noted** that LBTH is the first borough in London to commit to such a comprehensive programme and the longer-term aspiration is that the changes will be mainstreamed into the core roles within those services for BAME groups (including asylum seekers, refugees and those granted Indefinite Leave to Remain) living and/or working in the Borough. However, before any changes are made the individual service will need to be looked at to see how effectively it is working based on the available data,
- ❖ **Welcomed** the work being done to (i) promote, retain and progress BAME women, who are under-represented in leadership roles, (ii) build a more diverse and inclusive workforce in which contributions from all staff members are valued (**e.g.**, developing a training and support).
- ❖ **Noted** that there are other organisations that are also with the support of the Council are looking at developing more female empowering projects as well as leadership projects as well.
- ❖ **Noted** that savings will be reprofiled and other cuts that are going to full Council that may need to be reviewed to consider whether or not it is going to affect the workforce.
- ❖ **Commented** that with regard to the work force profile over the last couple of years staff (i) earning over 60K who are BAME, is down to few percentage points, (ii) earning over 60K who are female, is down four percentage points and (iii) earning over 60K who are living with a disability is down to a few percentage points.
- ❖ **Noted** LBTH are going to undertake a detailed analysis of the pay gap to understand exactly what is going on. However, since 2019 there have been big changes in the workforce **e.g.**, LBTH has lost 300 staff from 2019 to 2021 and insourcing of Street Services means that it is not yet clear. Once that has been clarified LBTH would be able to go back and benchmark with other organisations in terms of how they have set that figure.
- ❖ **Noted** that when undertaking any reorganization d restructures an Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA) provides a way of systematically taking equal opportunities into consideration when LBTH undertakes any significant changes to policy or services that could have disproportionate impact on particular groups.
- ❖ **Agreed** that it is important to ensure BAME staff are involved and engaged in the design and delivery of any service.
- ❖ **Agreed** that investing in diversity including ethnic diversity will improve the quality of their customer service, build long term relationships with customers, and improve ethnic staff performance.

- ❖ **Agreed** that diversity must remain a core priority for senior leaders and that they should have responsibility for delivering measurable diversity outcomes.
- ❖ **Agreed** that there needs to be a safe space within the Council for staff to ensure that there can be meaningful discussions around race so that that idea of making sure that that LBTH staff are at the heart of any decision making.
- ❖ **Noted** that the Council are collaborating with local employers across various sectors together in terms of enabling more local people to get into employment and working with local universities around summer schemes and looking at internship programs.

In conclusion, the Chair thanked everyone for the for the presentation and stated that **(i)** it had been an especially useful discussion that helped Members get a sense of the direction of travel; and **(ii)** he looked forward to keeping a close eye on the on the BAME action plan and to receive a progress at a future meeting.

7. TRACKING RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 Review of LBTH response to COVID-19

The Committee noted the Executive's updated action plan response to the recommendations arising from OSC's review of the Council's response to the COVID-19 Pandemic to September 2020. It was noted that Covid-19 and its variants will continue to circulate it that it is estimated that it will take 5 year to get to a predictable endemic state. Repeated vaccination may be required to maintain immunity and future epidemics are possible that will overwhelm health and care services. . The main points raised because of questioning summarised as follows:

The Committee:

- ❖ **Agreed** that LBTH needs to create conditions in which can live, work and study as safely as possible while the virus circulate
- ❖ **Agreed** that the response will need to focus on the most vulnerable and the direct/indirect disproportionate impacts on individuals, groups, and communities with LBTH.
- ❖ **Noted** that whilst there is no longer a legal requirement for people with coronavirus (Covid-19) infection to self-isolate it is their personal responsibility not to pass on any infection.
- ❖ **Agreed** that there is no doubt that coronavirus has had a negative impact on staff with anxiety about the pandemic, forced lockdowns and uncertainty about when this will end.
- ❖ **Noted** that young adults have been especially badly hit during the pandemic with curtailed education, diminished job prospects and reduced social contact with peers.
- ❖ **Noted** that the covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated access problems in general practice and patients have reported finding it difficult to book appointments and access treatment.
- ❖ **Agreed** that whilst LBTH does not have a direct influence over general practitioners there has been discussion at the Boroughs Health and

Well-Board about encouraging Tower Hamlets GP Care group to offer patients a choice of the type of appointment they would prefer whether it be video, face-to-face, or a home visit. As some patients have struggled to get appointments for regular health check-ups, treatments, and drug reviews, meaning that some were unable to manage their condition.

- ❖ **Hoped** that as LBTH enters a quiescent phase of COVID then the hope is that there will be a return more to normal service across the board.
- ❖ **Agreed** that the clearest impact of Covid-19 is in the infection and mortality rate in Tower Hamlets. However, there are significant indirect physical health impacts too. The interaction Tower Hamlets residents have with the NHS for non-Covid-19 related issues changed or reduced in most areas when the pandemic started. Due to this and a fear of Covid-19, some are not getting the care or treatment they need. Meanwhile, the wider determinants of health (e.g., employment levels) are changing. There is a real risk that health inequalities in the Borough will increase and that many will be living in poorer health. This is likely to be a national trend, but Tower Hamlets may be hit harder given the existing health inequalities. However, going forward there is also an opportunity to capitalise on people's interest in staying healthy to encourage things like smoking cessation and active travel. The NHS is also likely to accelerate system changes and retain aspects of their pandemic response that worked well, such as 111 use and digital consultations.
- ❖ **Agreed** that there are lots of business continuity lessons to be learned from the pandemic across the organization and the partner agencies that need to be embedded in local policies as has been the case with the flu pandemic plan.
- ❖ **Noted** the provision of universal free tests in England is soon ending, as the pandemic reaches endemic levels. Whilst from April 1, 2022, those not classed as vulnerable will have to pay for a lateral flow test as free universal symptomatic and asymptomatic testing will end for the general public in England.
- **Expressed** concern that self-isolation support payments of £500 for those on low incomes have stopped and puts LBTH in a position of having to make some pretty quick decisions. Therefore, the Committee indicated that it wished to consider how LBTH was going to address this as part of the living with Covid plan.
- **Noted** that the self-isolation support payments are interlocking system, so not only is the self-isolation payments paid or funded by government grant, but that access to it you need a PCR positive test code. Therefore, with the removal of PCR test there is no mechanism that LBTH would be able to utilize to determine whether or not somebody actually has the virus or not even if funding were to be found to help those on low incomes .
- ❖ **Noted** that to cover isolation payments is a challenge that LBTH face because as soon as you start changing and tinkering with one part of the system, it has knock on effects in other parts of the system and that the challenge that LBTH face which is responding to that and trying to

chart a way forward so that LBTH can support residents to be as safe as possible.

- ❖ **Agreed** there at some point Covid must be treated not as an emergency pandemic but a longer-term fact of life, which is mitigated in ways that allows everyday life to carry on.
- ❖ **Noted** that the virus is to be seen as “endemic,” but with the possibility of yet more variants, that potentially produce a different kind of strain on the service although the experience with Omicron so far has not translated into serious illness to anywhere near to the same extent as previous variants of Covid.
- ❖ **Noted** that LBTH came into the pandemic with high but improving levels of deprivation and employment. However, since the first lockdown, there has been an increase in financial hardship from a reduction in income. One of the clearest signs of changing circumstances has been the surge in food bank use and demand for emergency food packages.

In conclusion, the Chair thanked everyone for the for the presentation and stated that the provided overview had given the Committee some level of assurance and also raised some questions as well and the Committee will be keeping a close eye on this issue and wished to receive further updates.

7.2 Recycling Behaviour Change

Members were reminded that Overview and Scrutiny held a challenge session on Wednesday 23rd September 2020 on how the Council applies evidence and best practice to influence resident behaviour change to boost recycling rates in the Borough.

The Committee

- ❖ **Agreed** that recycling is vital to a circular economy as it feeds materials such as plastics, paper, metal, and glass back into manufacturing and reduces the need for virgin materials, saving both money and carbon in the process.
- ❖ **Agreed** that LBTH needs to collaborate closely with residents to drive up recycling, creating actionable insights for the Council, housing providers and residents to help them recycle more to drive awareness and behaviour change across the Borough.
- ❖ **Noted** that food waste accounts for about half the weight of household rubbish in Tower Hamlets. When food waste is collected separately it can be turned in to something useful. The food waste collected from households in Tower Hamlets is taken to a special processing plant where it is turned in to compost and used by farmers as a fertiliser.
- ❖ **Agreed** it is important for residents to understand what materials can and cannot be recycled can sometimes be confusing so by providing people with clear and concise information will help solve this issue. The first place to start should be making sure all collection points have

clearly labelled which materials should be placed in each appropriate bin.

- ❖ **Noted** that in certain parts of the Borough where we actually having to do extra collection or recycling and the Service collaborates very closely with landlords.
- ❖ **Agreed** that it was important to encourage people to collapse cardboard boxes to prevent recycling containers becoming overfilled. Which is why the Council wants to do some really targeted communication work with residents, landlords, managing agents in order to make sure if there is anything we can do to support them to recycle.
- ❖ **Noted** that those residents with a purple wheelie bin or a large communal recycling bin, can empty recycling into the bin loose or use any clear sack. If residents do not have access to a purple bin, they can collect recycling sacks from Idea Stores and libraries.
- ❖ **Noted** that clear sacks and food waste liners can be purchased from most supermarkets.
- ❖ **Noted** that Tower Hamlets has a remarkably diverse and changing population and faces considerable challenges improve recycling. 86% of the Boroughs population live in high rise properties or gated communities with limited storage space and properties with gardens (and therefore garden waste) are rare. Therefore, given that the biggest challenge is around flats that this where the biggest benefit is to be had from. To encourage participation and increase the recycling figures the basics need to be right and need to work alongside innovative ways of improving the take up of recycling across geographical areas and property types across the diverse population.
- ❖ **Agreed** that much greater consideration also needs to be given to incentivising recycling and making sure that recycling becomes the norm in all households across the borough.
- ❖ **Noted** that as part of the commitment to reduce single-use plastic, improve the quality of recycling and save money, the Council are proposing to roll out of reusable recycling bags for the reusable bags . These bags will reduce the amount of single use plastic and reduce the impact on the environment.
- ❖ **Noted** that the recycling market prefers to receive the material loose, so removing plastic bags should reduce processing cost. In addition, reusable bags can be used over and over again so they will cost less to supply than the single use plastic bags in the longer term.

In conclusion, the Committee having **(i)** reviewed and noted the progress of the service action plan; **(ii)** considered areas of concern; and **(iii)** resident's behaviour change on recycling the Chair thanked everyone for their contribution to the discussion which had been very useful the level of recycling has been a key issue for the Council for some time now, and the compounded further by the pandemic; vehicle breakdowns; the transition of bringing in the service back in House and improving the service especially in regard to recycling.

8. UPDATES FROM SCRUTINY LEADS

The Committee received and noted the updates submitted and the Leads were requested to continue to provide these on a monthly basis.

9. PRE-DECISION SCRUTINY OF UNRESTRICTED CABINET PAPERS

Following comments by the Committee the Pre-Decision Scrutiny Questions (PDSQ) Members **agreed** the particular questions/recommendations that they wanted to raise with Cabinet on the 15th of December 2021 (**See attached appendix**).

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

The Committee **noted** that:

- ❖ With no other business to discuss, the Chair called the meeting to a close; and
- ❖ The next meeting will be on Monday 7th March 2022.

Finally, the Chair thanked scrutiny members, for their attendance and participation tonight.

11. EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

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

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

Nil items.

The meeting ended at 8.33 p.m.

Chair, Councillor Mohammed Pappu
Overview & Scrutiny Committee