

Non-Executive Report of the: COUNCIL 24 th January 2024	 TOWER HAMLETS
Report of: Janet Fasan, Director of Legal and Monitoring Officer	Classification: Unrestricted
Motion for debate submitted by an Opposition Group	

Originating Officer(s)	Matthew Mannion, Head of Democratic Services
Wards affected	All wards

SUMMARY

1. Council Procedure Rule 11 allows for time at each Ordinary Council meeting for the discussion of one Motion submitted by an Opposition Group. The debate will follow the rules of debate at Council Procedure Rule 13 and will last no more than 30 minutes.
2. The motion submitted is listed overleaf. In accordance with Council Procedure Rule 11, submission of the Opposition Motion for Debate will alternate in sequence between the opposition groups. This Opposition Motion is submitted by the Labour Group.
3. Motions must be about matters for which the Council or its partners has a direct responsibility. A motion may not be moved which is substantially the same as a motion which has been put at a meeting of the Council in the previous six months; or which proposes that a decision of the Council taken in the previous six months be rescinded; unless notice of the motion is given signed by at least twenty Members.
4. Notice of any proposed amendments to the Motions must be given to the Monitoring Officer by Noon the day before the meeting.

MOTION

Set out overleaf is the motion that has been submitted.

OPPOSITION MOTION FOR DEBATE – LGA Peer Review

Proposed by: Cllr Marc Francis

Seconded by: Cllr Amina Ali

This council notes:

- An LGA Peer Review is designed to provide a critical-friend external support, rather than an independent audit or inspection of the quality and performance of local authority services.
- However, this did not inhibit the LGA peer group from providing some stark wording in the narrative of the report itself and offer serious recommendations to address concerning issues regarding the political and executive management of the council.
- That the LGA Peer Review found “there are ‘two councils’ in operation at Tower Hamlets which is impacting on the speed and effectiveness of decision making.”
- The LGA found “there is a lack of trust between the Mayor’s Office and senior officers, with examples of inappropriate questioning and pressure to feed things into the Mayor’s Office for ‘sign off’”.
- That this had led to: “unnecessary delays, with an example of one service area waiting for four months to receive a decision on something which would have previously been a delegated decision to officers.”
- The report states “Some of the functions of the Mayor’s Office are duplicating existing structures within the council, and as a result is causing confusion regarding internal governance processes. The size of the Mayor’s Office is an outlier when compared to other mayoral authorities and this is largely because there are many officers there who would ordinarily be located elsewhere in the council.”
- Under the previous administration the 2021 LGA Peer review found that: “There is a strong and cohesive Senior Leadership Team well led by the Chief Executive, with all elements of the leadership team describing good member-officer relationships upon which decision-making is based.”
- The 2023 LGA peer review makes clear that there has been a very considerable churn in senior management since May 2022, which is potentially destabilising to the authority and unhelpful in securing improvements to performance.
- To note further departures of senior staff and the failure to find appointable candidates to the roles of Corporate Director of Children’s Services and Housing & Regeneration.
- In response to the LGA Peer Review, Labour councillors offered to work with the Mayor and Corporate Leadership Team to help devise solutions to address these concerns, but that this offer was simply ignored and so Opposition councillors have had no input into what a corporate response should be.

- The peer review was critical of how scrutiny is conducted and found “the chair of the scrutiny committee and all sub committees are currently from the ruling party (Aspire) which does not reflect best practice. This also means that all the Chairs are male.”
- Similarly, it draws attention to the absence of women in both the Cabinet itself and the political decision-making process as being ‘concerning’.
- The Action Plan put forward in November simply ignores the recommendation that the Overview & Scrutiny Committee and the Audit Committee should be Chaired by an Opposition councillor.
- Aspire councillors blocked the appointment of the Labour Group’s nominee to the Lead Scrutiny Member for Resources portfolio, preferring to leave this position vacant to avoid a Labour councillor having the power to lead the scrutiny of Tower Hamlets Council’s finances.
- That under this administration relationships with third sector/voluntary partners “have weakened” due to the introduction of the mayor’s community grant and that they “felt that they have not been properly involved in the co-design of the programme and as a result their confidence is low”.
- Under the previous administration, the 2021 LGA Peer Review stated that: “Those in the Council reflect that partnership working came to the fore during the pandemic and continues to go from strength to strength for the benefit of residents and businesses and it was made clear to the peer team that partners are strongly committed to the ambitions of the Place”.

This Council believes:

- The Action Plan’s proposal of a Tower Hamlets Women Commission is a completely inadequate response to the lack of female voices and those of people with different backgrounds to Aspire’s Cabinet members in decision-making.
- The Action Plan does not adequately address the LGA’s recommendation that in the case of both grants and property disposals there should be involvement and oversight from the Overview and Scrutiny Committee with there also being an ability to ‘call in’ decisions.
- The process proposed for “reviewing” the Mayor’s Office will not do anything to end either the perception or the reality of a “council within a council” culture identified by many staff and the LGA Peer Review Team.
- In the absence of meaningful cross-party engagement or even discussions by the Corporate Leadership Team with Opposition councillors, residents can have no confidence in the draft Action Plan.

This council resolves:

- To withdraw the draft Action Plan and instruct the Corporate Leadership Team to engage with Opposition councillors about what would be a realistic and useful set of changes to meet the criticism of Tower Hamlets Council's governance and to bring back a new Action Plan to Full Council within three months.