

## OPPOSITION MOTION FOR DEBATE – LGA Peer Review

### ADMINISTRATION AMMENDMENT

Proposed by: Cllr Maium Talukdar

Seconded by: Cllr Kabir Ahmed

#### ADDITIONS BOLD

#### DELETIONS STRUCKTHROUGH

#### This council notes:

- An LGA Peer Review is designed to provide a **rigorous** critical-friend **review**. ~~external support, rather than an independent audit or inspection of the quality and performance of local authority services.~~
- **The LGA Corporate Peer Review is entirely independent of the Council and examines the performance of the Council holistically examining all of the Council's key performance metrics and their performance against them as well as addressing structure, the political interface, governance, leadership of place and organisation culture. The peer review is conducted by senior figures in the world of local government that in our case included Labour's Steve Bullock (ex-directly elected mayor of Lewisham) and Carolyn Downs who spent many years as Chief Executive of Brent, has previously been Chief executive of the LGA, Chief Executive of the Legal Services Commssion and Deputy Permanent Secretary and Director General for Ministry of Justice. The Comment also ignores the fact that subsequent to the LGA review the Council underwent a further independent inspection and improved its performance for Investors In People confirming that the organisation had a robust and healthy approach to its staff and staff management.**
- **As you would expect** ~~However, this did not inhibit the LGA peer group from providing some stark wording in the~~ **useful** narrative **in** of the report itself and offer **valuable** ~~serious recommendations to address concerning issues regarding the political and executive management of the council.~~
- **In fact it was a well-considered balanced report that compares well with recent LGA reports into other local authorities given the unique social and economic profile of the Borough.**
- **The report concluded that the new administration:**
  - **had provided a fresh impetus to the Council,**
  - **Members and Officers had done well to delivery of election promises to date including free school meals and implementation of the educational maintenance allowance,**

- **had a sound financial base.**
- **had an ambitious set of priorities that were widely understood by Members, Officers and Partners,**
- **Praised the Councils Communications team,**
- **Had a highly skilled, dedicated workforce evidently committed to delivering the best outcomes for the Borough,**

**Their report also:**

- **Commended the Council for developing a three year financial plan which will enable investment in services and priority areas once completed.**
  - **Commended the Council for some very effective partnership working in Tower Hamlets**
  - **Recognised statutory partnership working to be particularly strong.**
  - **Commended the council for being committed to being a learning organisation with a genuine appetite to explore and adopt best practice.**
  - **Acknowledged that the council demonstrated a high degree of organisational maturity in its positive response to critical challenge.**
  - **Commended the Council for creating the Transformation Board.**
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- That the LGA Peer Review **agreed with the concerns that had been raised with it in advance of the review by the Mayor and the current CEO** found **that** “there are ‘two councils’ in operation at Tower Hamlets which is impacting on the speed and effectiveness of decision making.”
  - The LGA also **expressed concerns around trust, sign off of decisions and delays to decision making.** 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.”~~
  - **This was a legacy of the previous administration and Mayor who delegated significant mayoral powers to officers, which in our opinion left behind a culture of two councils. By contrast, the LGA concluded that ‘The Mayor is providing strong political leadership and is seen as**

approachable by both members and officers alike. Cabinet members are passionate about delivering the council's priorities and want what is best for the residents across the borough'.

- **The very positive IIP inspection that followed the LGA review suggests that the two-council culture issue is being addressed quickly and constructively and the new management team are bringing the staff with them on an improvement journey.**
- **The Action Plan report includes a review of the Mayor's office which has already been completed leading to savings for the Council.** ~~states "Some of the functions of the Mayor's Office are duplicating existing structures causing confusion regarding internal governance processes within the council and as a result is. 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."~~
- **The Mayor has empowered the Council, through strong central leadership and strategic direction, which has enabled the Council to reinvest in services. His Office has worked with services across the Council to deliver one of the most ambitious, progressive and expansive policy programmes seen in Local Government.**
- ~~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 not uncommon following a change of political and managerial leadership' and it noted that the Council's recruitment process was well underway., 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.–~~
- **During this period the Council has successfully embarked upon a major transformation and improvement programme, significantly improved its financial position, secured long overdue audit sign off of Council accounts, improved its IIP rating and supported the LGA Corporate Peer Challenge.**
- **The actions included in the Action Plan are drawn directly from the 70+ positive suggestions and recommendations contained within the LGA report. All of these have been addressed, often using the wording in the report to frame the action. To this extent there was limited necessity for content discussion. All of the LGA suggestions and recommendations are to be addressed via specific actions. This does not preclude collaboration or engagement in respect of the development of solutions and project leads are encouraged to engage all relevant stakeholders**

where practical. The CEO has extended an invitation to members of the Council to discuss the LGA Peer Review findings. The Corporate Peer Action Plan will be the subject of review by the Overview and Scrutiny committee on a regular basis. The first date for the committee to consider progress in relation to the action plan is currently being scheduled and will be revisited on a quarterly basis. This approach has been agreed with the Chair of the overview scrutiny committee and further details will be available on the councils committee website.

- ~~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 **are being invited to attend a meeting with the Chief Executive to discuss the Corporate Challenge Review Report and Action Plan.** ~~have been invited to a meeting with the~~ ~~have had no input into what a corporate response should be.~~
- The peer review **noted** ~~was critical of~~ how scrutiny is conducted and found “the chair of the scrutiny committee and all sub committees are currently from the **majority** ruling party (Aspire) **as is common practice.** ~~which does not reflect best practice.~~ This also means that all the Chairs are male. Similarly, it **notes** ~~draws attention to~~ the absence of women in both the Cabinet **despite Aspire offering positions to opposition female councillors which were refused.** ~~itself and the political decision-making process, as being ‘concerning’.~~
- The Action Plan put forward in November ~~simply ignores the~~ **sets out actions to define current best practice in relation to chairing, membership, and cross party working in and of committees including** the Overview & Scrutiny Committee **its Sub-Committees** and the Audit Committee. **It will conduct a review of current terms of reference for committees based on best practice including the appointment of women to lead or undertake senior political positions within the council. The Mayor will receive recommendations from that review and agree any necessary actions. The Mayor’s conclusions will be published.** ~~recommendation that should be Chaired by an Opposition councillor.~~
- **The Audit Committee has already considered the CIPFA recommendations on how its membership should be structured and agreed changes to ensure it remains robust and effective.**
- **In 2022 the Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed to Cllr Sabina Khan’s appointment as a Scrutiny Lead. This year again the position was offered to a female opposition councillor. It is unfortunate that this was refused and a male labour Councillor was proposed.** ~~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.~~

- **The report notes** ~~that under this administration~~ relationships with **some** third sector/voluntary partners “have weakened” **possibly** due to the introduction of the new ~~mayor’s~~ community grant **programme which has increased the number of organisations who can access Council grants.** ~~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”.~~
- **The Council recognises the need to maintain good working relationships with all voluntary sector organisations where possible but also recognises that it may not be possible to please everyone when making structural decisions about the way in which resources are allocated. The Council continues to work closely with the Voluntary Sector to co-design new and improved partnership infrastructure via PEG and the root and branch review they are currently undertaking. The Council’s partnership work also includes the development of a New Partnership Plan (recently approved) and it continues to work hard to strengthen and improve relationships with all our partners. The previous administration cut grants services to only 39 organisations funding 50 projects, to £2.6million per year. This has been increased to £4.5million a year with the transformed *Mayor’s Community* and *Mayor’s Small grants* scheme, which will see 86 organisations delivering 110 projects.**
- 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”. **Which was in large part a commentary on statutory and health partnerships. The latest LGA report states that these ‘statutory and health partnerships are of a good quality with health partners in particular referencing the strength of relationships in place with adult social care. These partnerships were strengthened during the COVID-19 pandemic, when an operational management group with health and care leaders was established. This strengthened trust has led to more effective partnership working which has resulted in improvements in many areas including reducing the number of delayed transfers from acute settings’. The corporate peer challenge report also referenced the council relationship with the Metropolitan Police stating that ‘the Council’s community safety work is considered sector leading by the Police who highly value their professional working relationship with the Council’. It is therefore not an accurate reflection of the LGA report to infer that partnership working under the previous administration was stronger.**

#### **This Council believes:**

- The Action Plan’s proposal of a Tower Hamlets Women Commission **must ensure that** ~~is a completely inadequate response to the lack of~~ female voices and those of people with different backgrounds to Aspire’s Cabinet members **are effectively engaged** during ~~in~~ decision-making **processes.**

- **There are a further commitments that are directly relevant to and supportive of the need to improve the profile of women in the Council and public life generally. These comprise:**
  - **Working with the LGA's Be a Councillor Campaign to encourage residents (especially women and those from under-represented groups) to stand for election,**
  - **conducting a review of terms of reference for committees based on best practice including the appointment of women to lead in the Council,**
  - **all parties will be encouraged to support this campaign and publish how they will actively encourage women candidates,**
  - **new initiatives to capture feedback from women regarding their experience of contributing to council meetings,**
  - **better codifying dedicated time for staff led group chairs to develop staff equalities networks,**
  - **review and re-run relevant staff and member awareness programmes.**
  
- ~~The Action Plan does not adequately address~~ **es** ~~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~~ **in line with the Council's Constitution.**
  
- **Both grants and property disposals can be and are scrutinised by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. As with all Member level decisions they can be called in.**
  
- The process proposed for "reviewing" the Mayor's Office **will follow the LGA Peer Review Recommendations.** ~~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. **Therefore, the Chief Executive has been liaising with Group Leaders on the Council about attending a meeting with the Chief Executive to discuss the Corporate Challenge Review Report and Action Plan.**

**This council resolves:**

- To **welcome the LGA Peer Review report and agree the comprehensive** ~~withdraw the draft~~ Action Plan and instruct the Corporate Leadership Team to engage with **all** ~~Opposition~~ councillors **on the progress of the Action Plan.** ~~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.~~