

LONDON BOROUGH OF TOWER HAMLETS

MINUTES OF THE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

HELD AT 18:04 ON MONDAY, 2 SEPTEMBER 2024

COUNCIL CHAMBER - TOWN HALL, WHITECHAPEL

Members Present in Person:

Councillor Jahed Choudhury	
Councillor Bodrul Choudhury	Scrutiny Lead for Housing and Regeneration
Councillor Suluk Ahmed	Scrutiny Lead for Community Safety
Councillor Ahmodur Khan	Scrutiny Lead for Resources
Councillor Abdul Mannan	Scrutiny Lead for Children and Education
Councillor Bellal Uddin	Scrutiny Lead for Adults and Health Services
Councillor Asma Islam	
Councillor Amy Lee	
Councillor James King	
Councillor Nathalie Bienfait	Scrutiny Lead for Environment and the Climate Emergency

Other Councillors Present in Person:

Councillor March Francis	
Councillor Sirajul Islam	
Councillor Kabir Ahmed	(Cabinet Member for Regeneration, Inclusive Development and Housebuilding)

Co-optees In Attendance Virtually:

Halima Islam

Officers Present in Person:

Karen Swift	(Director of Housing)
Abul Kalam	(Service Manager)
Afazul Hoque	(Head of Corporate Strategy & Communities)
Thomas French	(Democratic Services Officer (Committees))

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Cllr Amina Ali and Jahid Ahmed. Halima Islam joined the meeting online.

2. DECLARATIONS OF DISCLOSABLE PECUNIARY INTEREST AND OTHER INTERESTS

No declarations of disclosable pecuniary interest were received at the meeting.

3. UNRESTRICTED REPORTS 'CALLED IN'

3.1 Approval of the council's revised Homelessness Accommodation Placement Policy

Councillor Marc Francis, with Councillor Sirajul Islam presented the reasons for call-in on behalf of the Call-in members and proposed alternative course of action as set out in the report.

The committee made the following comments and questions:

- What fundamental change do you think the council could make to ensure the homelessness policy works better? Cllr Marc Francis stated the council may find itself in a position where they have to move residents far away, but the council is not in that position. Residents were not consulted on this and the council does not understand what impact this will have on residents who are moved. The council should allocate funding better for housing homeless residents closer to the borough.
- What are the benefits of calling in this decision for review? Cllr Marc Francis stated that it would give the council time to understand the impact of this decision on residents on being moved away and give time to find appropriate funding for homelessness in the borough.
- What is equality impact of this decision on residents? Cllr Sirajul Islam detailed mental health issues on residents who are moved far away from the borough and isolation that comes with a move like that. There are religious implications on families being moved away from important religious and cultural services, that they could no longer access. Cllr Marc Francis stated an example of Somali Families in borough who have reported concerns of being moved away from services and important connection that are vital to wellbeing of their community.

Councillor Kabir Ahmed, Cabinet Member for Regeneration, Inclusive Development and Housebuilding, with Karen Swift, Director of Housing, Abul Kalam, Service Manager set out the context of the Cabinet Decision and reviewed the key elements of the decision.

The committee made the following comments and questions:

- The council is currently providing new schemes for supporting homelessness residents, why is this decision being made when the new schemes have not been reviewed yet? Officers confirmed the new schemes are only pilots with limited funding, that should run a long side a range of measures the council delivers.
- How can the council ensure the quality and suitability of the temporary accommodation? Cllr Kabir Ahmed detailed the increased staffing the council has put in place to secure temporary accommodation and monitoring and inspecting accommodation offers. Officers detailed the inspection procedures that the council has put in place, as well as

feedback the council seeks from residents in temporary accommodation.

- The cost of housing residents outside the borough, would comfortably house a large majority of residents within vacant rentable properties in the borough. Does the council not have a suitable reputation with landlords to find rentable accommodation within the borough? Cllr Kabir Ahmed detailed that often landlords do not wish to house homeless residents, based on perceived limited earning potential or discrimination. While the council does work with many private rentals across the borough, many properties will remain empty, and the council cannot do much about that. Members of the committee should engage with landlords and seek their feedback on how they can help with homelessness in the borough.
- Placing families away from their wider family and communities is hard for members to consider, how do you ensure they will get support if they are moved further away? How far away is too far away? Cllr Kabir Ahmed stated that the focus is to keep residents as close as possible to the borough, and the policy will be still to place within borough where possible. However the housing options will be based on the need of the resident and it will be what can be found at the time, within the best possible distance.
- Has the council considered the impact moving families will have on children's education? Officers confirmed that when a longer distance move is being considered, moving schools is recommended, so travel is less of an issue. Children undertaking GCSEs however are recommended to stay within their current school.
- Will the council consider supporting additional cost that will come from moving further away, with children still in school? Officers confirmed that in emergencies it is considered, but the policy currently does not allow for any funding in this way.

Members expressed concern about limited time that the chair set out for the call in, especially as this meeting only has the call in as an agenda item. Officers confirmed that the meeting was following the call in procedure as set out in council constitution.

After hearing from the Call-in Members, Lead Member and officers, the Committee considered the reasons for the Call-in and discussed if the committee should take further action.

DECISION

The Committee **RESOLVED** that no further action would be taken on the call in.

The meeting ended at 19:40

Chair, Councillor Jahed Choudhury
Overview & Scrutiny Committee