

London Borough of Islington

Policy and Performance Scrutiny Committee - 14 February 2019

Non-confidential minutes of the meeting of the Policy and Performance Scrutiny Committee held at on 14 February 2019 at 7.30 pm.

Present: **Councillors:** O'Halloran (Chair), Debono, O'Sullivan, Heather, Champion, Chowdhury, Gantly, Chapman, Bell-Bradford, Khurana and Jeapes
Also Present: **Councillor:** Hull

Councillor Una O'Halloran in the Chair

- 82 **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Item 1)**
Councillors Woodbyrne, Spall, Gallagher and Wayne
- 83 **DECLARATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (Item 2)**
None
- 84 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (Item 3)**
None
- 85 **TO APPROVE MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING (Item 4)**
RESOLVED:
 (a) That the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 24 January 2019 be confirmed and the Chair be authorised to sign them
 (b) That the notes of the visits in relation to the Scrutiny Review on Universal Credit be noted
- 86 **MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES (Item 5)**
None
- 87 **PUBLIC QUESTIONS (Item 6)**
The Chair outlined the procedure for dealing with Public questions and filming and recording of meetings and the fire evacuation procedures
- 88 **CHAIR'S REPORT (Item 7)**
The Chair stated that this was her last meeting as Chair of the Committee and she wished to thank Members and officers for the support that they had given her

Members of the Committee stated that they wished to place on record their appreciation for the work and diligence, during her time as Chair of the Committee and wished her success in her new role of Executive Member (Community Development)

Members also raised concern at the recent decision of OFWAT to reject the Thames Water 5 year business strategy and whether this would affect the investment strategy on pipe replacement outlined by Thames Water at the previous meeting

RESOLVED:

- (a) That a vote of thanks be accorded to Councillor O'Halloran for her work on behalf of the Committee during her time as Chair
- (b) That with regard to the OFWAT decision referred to above on the Thames Water business plan, the GLA be contacted to ascertain whether there will be any pan London approach to OFWAT to ensure that investment proposed for pipe replacement in London is maintained

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PRESENTATION EXECUTIVE MEMBER FINANCE, PERFORMANCE AND COMMUNITY SAFETY (Item 8)

Councillor Andy Hull, Executive Member Finance, Performance and Community Safety was present at the meeting and made a presentation to the Committee, copy interleaved,

During the presentation the following main points were made –

- In response to a question it was stated that the Council had increased its reserves to 5% this year, from 4% last year to ensure increased resilience against financial threats caused by Government funding cuts
- In terms of the Fair Funding review there was a consultation document out at the moment and the Council were aligning themselves to a joint response from London Councils, and that it is proposed that deprivation be removed from the criteria for funding, which would impact adversely on London Councils. It was stated that the response from London Councils would be circulated to Committee Members when available
- In response to a question it was stated that the next round of apprenticeships would be looking to support programmes to upskill apprentices, and that the Council were working with schools
- Councillor Hull stated that he would provide details of the termination on the shared digital contract to Members
- It was stated that there were known hot spots with regard to drug dealing and that these were being reviewed, and complaints are acted upon in conjunction with the Police
- Reference was made to the good work being carried out at the Hornsey Road shelter for homeless people, and that the use of vacant properties in the borough was being looked at in the property development strategy
- It was stated that whilst the Council were encouraging channel shift facilities were available whereby those who had no access to computers could still access services
- It was stated that additional Police resources were being made available in Highbury West and Finsbury Park wards
- In response to the recent murder in the borough it was stated that work is taking place with the family and the Police, and with local organisations in the Caledonian area
- In response to a question as to the fact that there is often a lack of communication between parents and young people in BME communities and work is taking place in this regard. In addition it is beneficial if the Police represent the community that it serves

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the response from London Councils in respect of the Fair Funding review be circulated to Members once this is available

- (b) That Councillor Hull be requested to send details on the termination of the shared digital service contract to Members of the Committee

The Chair thanked Councillor Hull for his presentation

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SCRUTINY REVIEW -UNIVERSAL CREDIT - WITNESS EVIDENCE/NOTES OF VISITS (Item 9)

Hannah Bowman, Housing and Adult Social Services and Marcia Gay, Peabody Trust were in attendance for this item and made a presentation to the Committee, copy interleaved

During consideration of the presentation the following main points were made –

- By January 2019 about 1795 council tenants have moved to UC
- Arrears are rising for those moving onto UC, which impacts on the ability to collect rent and eventually to deliver services
- There is a lot of support on offer but take up is low – support includes help to manage claim, problems being experienced, budgeting and debt advice, use of APA's where appropriate, engagement to reduce arrears, access help
- Council is speaking to co-ops who collect rent on our behalf, about the processes that they need to go through to verify rent and support their tenants, information provided to TMO's who do not collect rent to help them support their residents and direct them to support. In addition, talking to DWP about issues that occur for the first time, like rent increases and 53 week rent years
- Housing are involved in the corporate UC working group and a housing sub group, which looks at the impact of UC from Council, other services and voluntary sector statistics
- It was noted that DWP have recognised that there is a need for help with making a claim for the most vulnerable groups, but the funding received by the CAB nationally equates only to £100k in Islington, which on current reports sounds likely to be inadequate
- The Council's approach to assisting residents will be updated and reviewed on a regular basis
- It is more challenging to monitor the effect of UC in the private sector. About 2300 residents claim HB or UC and live in private sector accommodation in Islington. The private rented sector is high cost and in high demand, so less landlords are reliant on letting properties to residents who need to claim benefits
- Homelessness in the private sector accommodation has been the third most common reason for homelessness in approaching the Council, because they are at risk of homelessness. UC is becoming a factor in this category of homelessness
- This reason can often be masked as residents who fall into arrears and lose their private sector accommodation may not come directly from this to the Council
- The housing advice team are finding low levels of understanding about UC amongst those whose homelessness may have been contributed to by UC, and private sector tenants are not seeking help at an early stage when moving to UC, and it is often too late for the housing advice team to work with them and the landlord to resolve the arrears
- The work to date has included obtaining funding to work with private landlords to prevent homelessness from landlords concerned about UC: work with private landlords to find alternative accommodation in the private sector, however this has proved easier to implement in other boroughs as the private sector is more affordable, and landlords are more reliant on letting properties to those in receipt of benefits

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- Where private sector tenants are threatened with homelessness and are benefit capped, the team refer them to the iMAX team for support and discretionary housing payments can be arranged to support these landlords
- Accessing residents to give them advice at an earlier stage would enable more prevention work to take place with landlords, however these households tend to be less engaged with the Council
- Private landlords are becoming less keen to accept those on benefits, and finding accommodation for single people under 35 is becoming more challenging
- In response to a question it was stated that the average arrears for a family on UC was about £1200. There is a need to take a sensible approach to tackling arrears and how it could impact on the HRA
- It was stated that APA's were used in 32% of cases, and this is expected to increase
- It was stated that the Council could apply for a deduction of arrears, however this left families with even less to live on under UC and voluntary payment of arrears was encouraged
- The view was expressed that the Council needed to isolate the impact of UC on rent arrears, in comparison to when HB was applicable
- Peabody Trust stated that they were using intelligent data to identify tenants at an early stage and had a landlord portal system to text residents to give them information on UC and offer assistance. If Peabody applied for an APA they would also give budgeting advice, however there has been a low take up for this
- Peabody rent arrears were similar to the Council, and the main reason was that arrears built up from the 5 week delay payment for receiving UC. The rent arrear figure is comparable across Peabody Trust properties across London
- Peabody staff were based in Job Centres once a week to assist claimants and staff did door knocking to inform residents about UC and support that could be offered

The Chair thanked Hannah Bowman and Marcia Gay for attending

91 **COUNCIL SICKNESS ABSENCE (Item 10)**

Councillor Andy Hull, Executive Member Finance. Performance and Community Safety was present at the meeting and was accompanied by Alan Grant, Acting Head of Human Resources.

During consideration of the report the following main points were made –

- The average amount of sickness per employee per year is 8.6 days however if long term sickness is taken out (more than 20 days per employee), then this reduced to 3.2 days per Council employee
- Members expressed the view that mental health statistics were high however this may reflect a more general classification and the category needed to be broken down and more defined
- A Member referred to the fact that sickness levels had risen over the past 2 years, and it would be useful to have a breakdown of days lost categorised by grade and whether there is a culture of taking off Mondays or Fridays
- In addition, it would be useful to have details of how long, once a problem has been identified for sickness procedures to be put in place and processed
- Alan Grant stated that this detail could be provided in future, however due to the short timescale for preparation of the report this was not available at that meeting
- In response to a question it was stated that staff received 6 months full pay and 6 months half pay. There are some staff who are off above a year, and such cases are looked at on an individual basis

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- The view was expressed that the report contained useful information to inform Members, and that an action plan should be established with Councillor involvement
- Reference was also made to the fact that whilst the sickness procedure policy was a good one on paper, it may be that there is a deficit in implementing it and this needed to be looked at
- It was also stated that accident information should be included if it is implicated with sickness absence, and there should be a vision of zero accidents, even though this is not necessarily achievable
- Reference was also made to the fact that there should be a breakdown of sickness/injury by manual and officer grades, compared to the number of Council employees, in order that comparisons can be made
- Members were informed that a new HR system is coming into operation in April and that this will give real time information on sickness to managers
- Discussion took place as to high levels of sickness in E&R and HASS and that this needed to be looked at in greater depth to analyse the reasons, especially in relation to the mental health statistics

RESOLVED:

That discussion take place between Councillor Hull and the Chair, with a view to including the issues raised above (and any other relevant issues), in future reports to the Committee, in order that they can monitor the sickness levels of Council staff

92

USE OF AGENCY STAFF (Item 11)

Councillor Andy Hull, Executive Member Performance, Finance and Community Safety was present for discussion of this item and was accompanied by Alan Grant, Acting Head of Human Resources.

During discussion the following main points were made –

- It was noted that agency spend had reduced to below £20m for the first time since 2010
- Agency staff accounted for 12.69% of the Council's workforce, which whilst still too high has shown a significant decrease
- The target is to reduce agency staff in the long term to 10% and 11.7% in the medium term. If sickness levels are reduced then this would reduce agency spend
- It was noted that the temporary to permanent policy in E&R and Legal, had proved successful and led to a reduction in agency staff. These staff are employed on 6 month probationary period. Staff on the redeployment list also had to be considered for potential vacancies, as the Council did not want to employ agency staff permanently, whilst having to make staff redundant, if they could fulfil the role. It was stated that a more detailed description of how temporary to permanent works could be included in a future report
- It was noted that some agency staff did not want to become permanent as they would then have to pay pension and they received additional holiday pay when working for an agency
- Reference was made to the fact that some agency work was seasonal, such as in Grounds Maintenance in E&R, where work is mainly Summer based, and they had recently employed a number of staff on permanent contracts and during the rest of the year they work in other areas of E&R
- Discussion took place as to the use of agency staff in children's social work and it was stated that this was mainly due to a new project commencing which had necessitated the employment of 20 additional social workers, but measures were in place to appoint permanent staff in the near future

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- Reference was also made to the high levels of agency social work staff in Adult Social Services and it was stated that this is an area to be looked at, however, an invest to save decision had been taken in relation to employing more social workers
- In response to a question as to whether residents were allocated a key social worker, it was stated that the intention was that a resident would be allocated a key worker, but more detail could be provided on this for Members

The Chair thanked Councillor Hull and Alan Grant for attending

93 MONITORING REPORT (Item)

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted

The meeting ended at 10.05p.m.

CHAIR