

London Borough of Islington

Policy and Performance Scrutiny Committee - 5 December 2022

Minutes of the meeting of the Policy and Performance Scrutiny Committee held at Council Chamber, Town Hall, Upper Street, N1 2UD on 5 December 2022 at 7.30 pm.

Present: Councillors: Kay (Chair), Chowdhury, Jackson, Clarke, Chapman, Heather, Staff, McHugh, Nargund, Weekes, Ibrahim and Russell

Also Present: Councillors: Khondoker and Ward

Councillor Jenny Kay in the Chair

48 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Item A1)

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Ibrahim, Pandor, Ozdemir, Nathan and Graham.

49 DECLARATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (Item A2)

None.

50 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (Item A3)

None.

51 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING (Item A4)

The following amendments to the minutes were proposed:

Minute 43 to be reworded to read: The Committee requested an update on when the response to the Net Zero Carbon 2030 strategy (including Waste Management) scrutiny review would be going to the Executive; and when the Executive response to the Performance Management and Development scrutiny review recommendations would be available.

Addition to minute 46: A Member made the point that in the Annual Workforce report on page 145 there is insufficient detail provided to effectively scrutinise sickness absence and agency workers in the council. The member noted the last reports to the Committee on these subjects were on 2 December 2021 and 4 November 2021 respectively. The Member asked that time be made available in the Committee workplan to receive reports on these two subjects.

In relation to the appended letter from Thames Water, it was noted that there had been a further burst pipe on Holloway Road since the previous meeting that took approximately one week to be repaired. A member suggested that the reasons for

this should be investigated by Thames Water. The Chair advised that she would contact Thames Water in relation to this.

RESOLVED:

That subject to the amendments listed above, the minutes of the previous meeting be agreed as a correct record and the Chair be authorised to sign them.

ACTIONS:

- Democratic Services to follow up on scrutiny response reports.
- The scheduling of an update on sickness absence and agency workers be discussed between the Chair and HR officers.
- The Chair to write to Thames Water in relation to the leak on Holloway Road.

52 **CHAIR'S REPORT (Item A5)**

The Chair brought the Committee's attention to the actions from the previous meeting and responses provided in the meeting papers.

In relation to point 13 on transfer of the apprenticeship levy, a member commented that it would be very helpful to have more specific information on what percentage of the apprenticeship levy is spent internally and externally, and the types of apprenticeship courses being funded externally.

In relation to point 16, on destinations and career progression of those on apprenticeships, a member expressed surprise that the council did not track the outcomes of those it supported into apprenticeships. It was noted that Ofsted rated one third of apprenticeship courses nationally as "requiring improvement" or "inadequate" and the member considered that it was important for the Council to track this data in light of this context. It was requested that officers consider how the effective tracking of apprenticeship outcomes may be enabled in the future, as mentioned at previous meetings.

In relation to point 7, on the status of previously agreed savings now considered undeliverable, the papers noted that the detail would be included in future budget monitoring reports. A member expressed disappointment that this detail was not yet available and suggested that the information would help to inform the scrutiny of the budget setting process. The Committee asked if it was possible for this detail to be provided in a standalone document and the officers present advised that this would be prepared and circulated in December.

In relation to point 6, on the employment of agency workers, a member requested data on how many agency workers and consultants were recruited in each financial year, how spend on this compared to previous years, which specific teams were employing agency workers, and why this was considered necessary. It was requested that data on agency workers and high-value interim workers be reported separately.

A member raised the career progression of BAME staff and queried the plans, targets and timescales to recruit more diverse staff to senior levels. It was noted that

the committee had previously asked about this topic. The Chair advised that this was a matter for Human Resources and the relevant Executive Member was the Executive Member for Finance, Planning and Performance. The Chair reiterated that the Committee wished to review the findings of the previous equalities working group held on BAME staff progression at a future committee meeting.

In relation to point 17, on staff sickness absence where mental health was recorded as a factor, it was commented that the data provided was helpful, but did not specify if work-related factors had contributed to the sickness absence. It was asked if any data was held in relation to this, including qualitative data. It was suggested that discussions with those on long-term sickness absence may be helpful to understand if work-related factors had contributed to their absence.

In relation to point 4, on the Islington Lettings scheme ending, it was suggested that the Housing Scrutiny Committee could consider lessons learned from the scheme, why it had not succeeded, and what the implications were for the council's relationships with private sector landlords, particularly in the context of rising rents.

ACTIONS:

That updates be requested on the above matters.

53 PUBLIC QUESTIONS (Item A6)

None.

54 EXTERNAL ATTENDEES (IF ANY) (Item A7)

None.

55 EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR EQUALITIES, CULTURE AND INCLUSION - ANNUAL PRESENTATION (Item C2)

Councillor Khondoker, the Executive Member for Equalities, Culture and Inclusion, presented to the committee. The presentation included detail of the Challenging Inequality Programme and its workstreams, and the work of the Equalities Team to support, facilitate and empower other council services to consider equalities issues in their work.

The following main points were raised in the discussion:

- A member noted that much of the council's equalities work focused on race, with some reference to LGBT+ issues and disabilities. It was queried if a similar approach would be taken for all protected characteristics, and also equalities issues such as disparities in income and wealth, and disparities in access to housing. In response, it was advised that the starting point of the Challenging Inequality programme was racial equality, and the next phase would focus on disability, however it was accepted that marginalised groups faced a range of challenges and the council wished to address all forms of inequality where it was able to do so.
- In response to a question, the Executive Member advised that it was important to understand intersectionality when considering the inequalities experienced by particular groups.

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- It was noted that the Executive Member for Finance, Planning and Performance had Executive responsibility for Human Resources, including equalities matters related to Islington Council as an employer.
- In response to a question on how key performance indicators were measured, it was explained that action plans were being developed and this would include how actions would be monitored and evaluated. A member asked if any timescales had been set for key outcomes to be identified. In response, it was advised that tangible targets and timescales were currently being identified, and an update would be reported to the committee when this was available to allow for further scrutiny. It was recognised that there may be difficulties in identifying quantitative performance measures in this area. Officers advised that it was hoped to identify five or six key target outcomes by the end of January; this focus on a limited number of outcomes would then help to drive change in those areas.
- The Chair noted that all Corporate Directors had responsibility for promoting equalities matters in their directorate and this was important to achieve improved outcomes for residents. It was queried if residents had been engaged in the development of the programme. The council's Principal Risk Report identified failure to address social inequalities as a key risk, and identified that clear prioritisation, governance, and programme management would be crucial to the programme's success. In this context, it was asked how the Committee could help to establish a rigorous approach to the monitoring of progress against priorities. In response, it was advised that the discussions were ongoing to ensure that equality objectives were included in the council's performance framework, and scrutiny played an important role in reviewing performance data. Officers recognised that Challenging Inequality was a broad topic and there was a need for a sharp focus and prioritisation of this work to ensure that it had the desired impact.
- Officers advised that a 'Wellbeing Index' was being considered as an approach to monitoring progress and outcomes.
- It was noted by members that staff from across the council had made fantastic contributions to the Challenging Inequality programme, sometimes in addition to their substantive roles. It was asked if the staff contributing to this work had received formal recognition for their work, and if it was possible to provide additional support to further develop these initiatives. In response, it was recognised that staff-led initiatives, such as the Black History 365 programme, had been successful in raising awareness and understanding of equality issues throughout the council. It was important to capture the impact of such sessions, and discussions were underway to consider how staff could be supported and recognised for their part in this.
- In response to a question, it was advised that translation services were available for non-english speaking residents. It was particularly important for information relating to cost-of-living support to be available in multiple languages. An example was given of signs in parks being written in different languages to ensure that all of the borough's communities feel welcome.
- A member asked about the digital divide, noting that some communities struggle to access the internet and cannot access key public services, utilities and banking services as a result. It was asked if more could be done to signpost residents to services that would support them to get online. For example, signposting to social tariffs offered by internet service providers for

those on lower incomes. In response, it was advised that this was currently being considered between the Executive Members with responsibility for Digital Services and Communities. It was thought that Libraries could have a key role in supporting and signposting residents to these services.

- A member asked about the council's role in ensuring that activities at older people's day centres and community settings were culturally appropriate. In response, it was advised that the council engaged with mosques and other local organisations on how best to provide services for their communities.
- The Chair summarised the discussion, commenting on the need for a rigorous approach to assessing outcomes and performance on equalities matters. The Committee would welcome the inclusion of equalities-related performance data in the quarterly corporate performance reports to allow for regular monitoring. It was noted that a new strategic plan was in development and key performance indicators would be reviewed in light of this. The Executive Member advised that this would be considered further outside of the meeting. It was requested that officers provide a written update on the development of these performance measures in January.

ACTIONS:

A written update be provided to the Committee on the development of equalities-related performance measures, and how these will be monitored and scrutinised, in January.

56 SCRUTINY REVIEW: COST OF LIVING CRISIS - WITNESS EVIDENCE (Item C1)

(i) Fuel Poverty and the work of SHINE

The Committee received a presentation from Jobe Bryer, Energy Advice Manager, on the role of the Seasonal Health Interventions Network and the support available to residents experiencing hardship due to increased energy costs. The presentation also summarised the energy efficiency of the council's housing stock.

The following main points were noted in the discussion:

- It was noted that the caseload of the SHINE service had increased due to the energy crisis.
- The Committee expressed concern about the impact of rising energy costs, not only for residents, but also for public services. The increased cost of energy was having an impact on schools and leisure centres, and their ability to offer services in a financially sustainable way. Some leisure centres had reduced operating hours as a result, and this would have an impact on the health and wellbeing of residents.
- It was asked if government cuts were hampering efforts to install energy efficiency measures in housing. In response, it was advised that the government had ceased the Green Homes Grant which primarily supported owner occupiers, and other schemes such as the Energy Company Obligation (ECO) had also been significantly reduced over recent years. In 2014 the council fully insulated the Holly Park Estate and primarily financed this through ECO funding. The council had been unable to finance energy

efficiency improvements through this scheme since as the scheme had been significantly reduced.

- Concern was expressed about residents on pre-payment meters in the current energy crisis, particularly as those residents had to be proactive in claiming government energy support measures, in comparison to those who received credit on Direct Debit payments. In relation to concerns about energy companies using debt collectors, officers advised that they were encouraging as many people as possible to join the priority services register, as those on the register could not legally be switched to a pre-payment meter.
- There were reports in the press about government vouchers for pre-payment meters going unclaimed, and it was thought that a proportion of these had been lost or delayed. Officers advised that they were aware of cases where residents had not received these vouchers, and in some instances they had liaised with energy companies on behalf of residents to resolve the issue. It was also noted that pre-payment meters only accepted a maximum credit of £250, which was being used significantly faster due to the high cost of energy.
- A member asked if officers were aware of any hurdles to residents accessing the services that SHINE refer to. In response, it was advised that due to significant demand there were some delays from the point of referral to residents receiving support. For example, it was known that there had been some recent delays to payments made from the GLA Warmer Homes scheme.
- A member asked if the Energy Advice service liaised with community and faith groups about the support available and suggested that further engagement may be helpful to promote the schemes available. In response, it was advised that there were regular communications with such organisations, although there was always scope to do more. The service was also promoted through social media and newsletters. Members considered that the most vulnerable residents may not engage with these channels and may not be aware of the advice and support available, and a possible recommendation may relate to how the availability of support is communicated.
- A member noted the work being carried out to improve the energy efficiency of the council's housing stock included internal wall insulation, new window, loft and roof insulation and the installation of LED lights. It was queried why the specification did not also include improvements in ventilation. It was advised that this would be taken up with the relevant officers.

The Committee thanked officers for their attendance.

(ii) Evidence from Cally Energy

The Committee was joined remotely by Elaine Trimble of Cally Energy, who presented on the work of the organisation in crowdsourcing funding for solar energy panels in the local area.

The organisation was currently engaging with GLL about the possibility of installing PV panels on Cally Pool.

The Committee asked how the council could help to support organisations like Cally Energy. In response, it was advised that there had been occasions where the council's response had been slow and this had resulted in delays to the organisation's work. It would also be helpful for the council to clearly detail what matters it would and would not accept in contracts in advance, as this would accelerate contractual negotiations. There was a suggestion that the council required the organisation to hold significant financial reserves for potential future maintenance and this affected the viability of small-scale community energy schemes. It was suggested that it would also be helpful if the council had an agreed position on ownership options for PV panels, as a variety of different models were possible.

Councillors thanked Elaine for her presentation. Cllr Clarke invited the organisation to present to members of the Environment and Regeneration Scrutiny Committee at a later date.

(iii) Evidence on the resident experience of retrofitting

The Committee was joined remotely by a local resident who shared their experience of seeking to retrofit their property with energy saving measures. The resident had sought to install external insulation on their home, however had been advised against this by the council's planning department, who indicated that a planning application was unlikely to be successful. Overall, the installation of energy efficiency measures had been a costly and complex process.

In response, officers, advised that a new supplementary planning guidance document was currently being prepared that would provide a framework for residents, businesses and others to seek planning permission for such improvements.

(iv) Question from a Member of the Public

Rev Steven Cooper, Minister at Wesley's Chapel and Leysian Mission in Bunhill Ward, asked a question about the council's recent decision to reduce the hours that heating is operational in properties with communal heating systems, commenting that this had a detrimental impact on vulnerable people living in those properties. It was advised that his concerns would be raised with the Acting Corporate Director of Homes and Neighbourhoods and the Executive Member for Homes and Communities for a written response.

(v) Update from the Chair on the Council Tax Support Scheme

As the report was not available, this was deferred to the next meeting.

ACTIONS:

- Housing Officers to respond to the query on improved ventilation in council properties;

- Officers and the Executive Member for Environment, Air Quality and Transport to consider how the SHINE service can be best promoted to vulnerable residents.
- The Committee was keen for the council to consider the experiences of organisations like Cally Energy and for these to help shape the council's response in future.

57 FINANCIAL MONITORING REPORT - MONTH 6 2022/23 (Item C3)

Paul Clarke, Director of Finance, and Councillor Ward, Executive Member for Finance, Planning and Performance, introduced the budget monitoring report.

The Committee noted the £4 million overspend in Adult Social Care, and that the Adult Social Care In-House Transformation Programme had been delayed to December 2022/23, causing a cost pressure of £500,000. This issue was referred to the Health and Care Scrutiny Committee to explore further.

A member expressed concern about the increase of schools in financial deficit. This was primarily due to an increase in energy costs, combined with a decrease in school roll numbers. Officers were working closely with schools to help them with their financial planning. Members also expressed concern about the increase in the cost of residential care services for children and young people. In response, it was advised that this was a national issue, the priority was ensuring that children were looked after safely and this was becoming increasingly expensive in the current financial climate.

The Chair thanked officers for circulating a briefing note on energy purchasing, which highlighted differences between Islington's approach in comparison to other local authorities. The Chair asked, where the council had different arrangements to other local authorities, how the council would factor in that level of risk into decision-making processes, and how should that inform the work of scrutiny in holding decision-makers to account. Councillor Ward indicated that this would be considered further in advance of the January meeting.

RESOLVED:

That the budget monitoring report be noted.

ACTION:

Councillor Ward and relevant officers to consider the question of risk management and report back to the next meeting.

58 MONITORING ITEM (Item C4)

Noted.

The meeting ended at 10.30 pm

CHAIR