

London Borough of Islington

Policy and Performance Scrutiny Committee - 21 February 2023

Non-confidential minutes of the meeting of the Policy and Performance Scrutiny Committee held in the Council Chamber, Town Hall, Upper Street, N1 2UD on 21 February 2023 at 7.30 pm.

Present: **Councillors:** Kay (Chair), Ozdemir (Vice-Chair), Jackson, Clarke, Chapman, Heather, McHugh, Nargund, Pandor, Weekes and Russell

Also Present: **Councillors:** Ward

Councillor Jenny Kay in the Chair

71 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Item A1)

Apologies were received from Councillors Ibrahim, Graham, Nathan, Chowdhury and Staff.

72 DECLARATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (Item A2)

None.

73 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (Item A3)

None.

74 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING (Item A4)

The Chair noted a typographical error at minute 63 where a line was repeated; it was advised that this would be amended accordingly.

RESOLVED:

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

75 CHAIR'S REPORT (Item A5)

It was advised that a date was being sought for committee members to meet with officers to discuss HR issues.

The Chair advised that the Scrutiny Response Tracker document had been circulated shortly before the meeting.

The Chair agreed to vary the order of business to consider the Annual Presentation from the Executive Member for Finance, Planning and Performance as the first substantive item.

76 **EXTERNAL ATTENDEES (IF ANY) (Item A6)**

None.

77 **PUBLIC QUESTIONS (Item A7)**

None.

78 **ANNUAL PRESENTATION - EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR FINANCE, PLANNING AND PERFORMANCE (Item C2)**

Councillor Ward, Executive Member for Finance, Planning and Performance, presented to the committee. The Executive Member noted that the presentation summarised the progress of services under his portfolio in the Resources directorate, however emphasised that he was happy to answer questions on any aspect of his portfolio.

The following main points were noted in the discussion:

- The Executive Member was pleased that the council had paid almost £30million in energy grants and covid funding that had benefitted around 80,000 residents and 3,000 businesses. The Executive Member was also proud of the launch of the Community Municipal Investment for the Net Zero Carbon programme, The Executive Member noted the ongoing austerity and financial challenges affecting local government and the impact this had on managing the council's budget.
- The Executive Member noted the significant workload in Legal Services, including the renegotiation of energy contracts and increase in disrepair cases. The Executive Member also commented on the recruitment and retention of legal specialists as a challenge in the current employment market.
- The Executive Member noted the work of the Democratic Services and Information Governance teams and their work in supporting members and the organisation in governance matters.
- On Electoral Services, the Executive Member expressed concerns about the government's introduction of Voter ID requirements. There was a concern that many people would be denied the right to vote, and also about the implications for election staff in responding to a high number of enquiries and processing identification applications in advance of the next election.
- The Executive Member noted the successful implementation of the new Business Support service and highlighted the important work carried out by Digital Services.
- On Human Resources, the Executive Member welcomed their work in processing 347 DBS checks for households hosting Ukrainian refugees across 282 households. A new approach to performance development was currently being implemented. Improvements were also being made to the recruitment process, including working towards attaining the Disability Confident Employer status.
- The Executive Member commented on the work underway to improve the resident experience of council services, including improvements at the customer contact centre and to online services. The further development of online services would allow staff resources to focus on resolving complex issues and complaints.

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- A member queried if the Executive Member was satisfied with the current range of performance measures covering his portfolio and if he considered any measures were lacking. In response, the Executive Member commented on the need to focus on persistent and complex issues and suggested that reviewing qualitative data helped to assess this.
- A member noted a recent investigation by the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman into the council's complaints handling processes and asked if the Executive Member was previously aware of these concerns, why an external review had been commissioned and why was it not possible to carry out this review in-house, and if the increase in complaints could be attributed to not dealing with relatively straightforward complaints about repairs in a timely and efficient way. In response, the Executive Member advised that he was aware of an increase in complaints since the pandemic however did not envisage such an investigation. The Executive Member's view was that issues that festered tended to fester for too long; it was right to commission an external organisation to review the council's processes in this context. It was necessary to thoroughly review the council's complaints handling as recent performance had not been good enough.
- A member asked if more staff resources would be allocated to complaints handling to deal with the backlog. In response, the Executive Member advised that he would be happy to arrange a discussion between members and senior officers to discuss the specifics in detail.
- In response to a question, the Executive Member advised that the Ombudsman investigation was prompted by the length of time taken to respond to complaints, The Committee commented on the need to efficient and effective escalation procedures.
- The Committee requested comparative information and best practice on how other local authorities structure their complaints handling function, and if there is any Ombudsman advice on the best way to structure complaints services. It was noted that the team that responded to complaints was a standalone service and it was queried if other local authorities embedded complaints officers in other services. The Executive Member advised that this would be looked into.
- A member queried if the borough had a large enough venue to hold the election count for the 2024 GLA election, given that the Sobell Centre was currently undergoing repairs following flood damage. In response, officers advised that options were currently being assessed.
- A member queried the accessibility of door entry systems on estates following the update of systems to cloud storage; the Executive Member advised that this could be discussed outside of the meeting.
- In relation to the new voter ID requirements, a member asked if the council was assessing those most at risk of being disenfranchised. In response, it was advised that officers were looking at this and clear communication would be needed ahead of the next election.
- A member asked about apprenticeships and training, and if the council would support "skills bootcamps" and other schemes to prepare people for employment. It was advised that these matters would need to be discussed with Cllr Bell-Bradford, the Executive Member for Inclusive Economy and Jobs.

- A member requested further information on the draft workforce strategy and suggested that this could also be considered in an upcoming meeting with HR officers. The Executive Member advised that members had a role to play in this work and he would discuss outside of the meeting.

The Committee thanked Councillor Ward for his attendance.

ACTIONS:

- The Committee requested comparative information on how local authorities structure their complaints handling functions and LGO guidance on this.
- A discussion be had on how members can contribute to the draft workforce strategy.

79 COST OF LIVING CRISIS SCRUTINY REVIEW - DISCUSSION ON CONCLUSIONS AND OUTSTANDING ISSUES (Item C1)

Evidence on food cooperatives

The Committee received evidence from Shiri Shalmy, a representative of Cooperation Town, a network of community food co-operatives. This highlighted the work of food co-operatives in providing low-cost and nutritious food to communities across North London.

The following main points were noted in the debate:

- Food cooperatives allowed people to combine their purchasing power and buy food in bulk, resulting in significant financial savings. It was commented that this gave people more choice and autonomy over their food choices, in comparison to accessing food banks, for example. Food cooperatives increased purchasing power by five to eight times more in comparison to purchasing food in shops. The aim was to provide access to healthy food at an affordable price.
- Food cooperatives also provided an opportunity for people to meet their neighbours and strengthened communities.
- There were four existing food co-ops in Islington and others across London. Cooperation Town provided a starter pack on how to run a food co-op and collaborated with local authorities on helping communities to self-organise.
- One challenge for food cooperatives was the availability of suitable space and it was helpful if such organisations were able to access community facilities for storage. This would include space to unload pallets and fridges for fresh goods.
- The organisation wished to develop long term and meaningful collaboration with the council to promote and support food cooperatives in Islington. This would involve training and supporting organisers based in the local community.
- A member strongly endorsed the work of the food cooperative on the Girdlestone Estate and noted that it had led to community vegetable growing initiatives and brought local people together.

- Following a question, it was advised that the London Borough of Camden had allocated space to ten local food co-operatives and this allowed joint purchasing of some items and also saved on logistical costs.
- Food was purchased in bulk from wholesalers, cash and carry shops, and sometimes supermarkets if this was the most cost-effective option.
- Following a question, it was advised that the most successful food cooperatives were supported by people already embedded in the community who had connections to different organisations and who understood local power dynamics.
- A member asked a question on the dynamic between food banks and cooperative food hubs; these were very different models, with food banks based on charity, and food cooperatives based on solidarity. It was queried if food cooperatives were a suitable option for people in challenging personal circumstances. In response, it was advised that many people involved in food cooperatives had complex lives, however unfortunately there would be a need for food banks while poverty persisted. Food cooperatives did however have other benefits; one food cooperative in Islington was run by Somali women who held regular informal mental health support sessions. Another cooperative in Camden led to the formation of a cooking club. Although there were administrative responsibilities associated with being a member of a food cooperative, there were also time savings associated with reduced time shopping for food.

The Committee thanked Shiri Shalmy for her attendance.

Conclusions of the scrutiny review

The Chair advised that the recommendations of the review would be submitted to the next meeting.

80

BUDGET MONITORING REPORT (Item C3)

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

The following main points were noted in the discussion:

- The Committee noted the significant increases to gas and energy prices over the last year and the adverse impact on the council's budget and the finances of local residents. It was advised that the proposed 2023/24 budget included an energy and inflation contingency to provide safety against possible future price increases; although it was noted that inflation and the cost of energy was expected to fall over the next year.
- The Committee noted that falling school rolls and an increase in homeschooling had impacted the borough's education budgets and the finances of local schools. It was commented that this had been considered by the Children's Services Scrutiny Committee.
- A member noted that £50,000 had been allocated towards the provision of automated toilets in the borough and queried exactly what this would be spent on. It was advised that an update would be sought from the responsible service.

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- The Mayor of London had announced that the GLA would be funding free school meals for all primary school pupils. As the council had already been funding this for several years, it was expected that this would be a welcome boost to the council's finances, but further details from the GLA were awaited.
- The Committee noted the requirements to install end-point heat meters in council properties, as detailed in the report, and requested a progress update.
- A member commented on the potential financial savings and environmental benefits associated with community energy projects and suggested that this be examined further. This had been considered by the Environment and Regeneration Scrutiny Committee.
- Members noted concerns about the financial viability of the new build programme in the current economic climate and requested comparative information and benchmarking against boroughs' New Build schemes; including the number of homes planned to be delivered, the progress against this, what we can learn from them, and financial monitoring comparisons over the past ten years.
- A discussion was had on how the council identifies and manages risks, particularly where these are rated as significant, or the council's arrangements vary from those of other local authorities. The Chair noted the query to the Executive Member for Finance, Planning and Performance at the December meeting on how risk management is considered in decision-making, and the response provided on the scrutiny response tracker. The Corporate Director of Resources commented that risks are noted in the principal risk report that is maintained by the Internal Audit service. For each risk this identifies the risk owner, usually the Corporate Director, and the Audit Committee regularly reviews the risks identified. The Chair's view was that this issue was broader than the role of the Audit Committee and the council should consider how emerging issues are identified and scrutinised.

RESOLVED:

That the budget monitoring report be noted.

ACTIONS:

That further responses be requested on:

- The spend on automated toilets
- Comparative new build data
- The progress of end-point heat metering

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The following main points were noted in the discussion:

- A member noted concerns expressed by local community centre coordinators about the role of the council's Fairer Together Hubs and suggested that vacancies for Community Centre managers and officers had not been advertised to the relevant local networks accessed by voluntary and community sector organisations. Officers highlighted the council's internal-first approach to recruitment and offered to review this further outside of the meeting. The Committee also asked for further information on this work and clarification on which scrutiny committee was responsible for scrutinising the Fairer Together Hubs.
- A member asked about the number of homelessness cases prevented, and if those residents had stayed in their existing accommodation, or had moved to other accommodation. It was requested that this performance indicator be explained in more detail.
- It was asked if future reports could include a performance indicator of the number of care leavers in suitable accommodation.
- A member asked if performance indicators on vaccine hesitancy could include ethnicity data and for this to be tracked over time. This may provide more insight on how work to address vaccine hesitancy in the borough.
- The Committee asked if performance measures relating to damp and mould could be detailed in future corporate reports. It was noted that performance in this area was a priority for the council. Officers advised that this would be considered further. A member suggested that this may be an area for the Housing Scrutiny Committee to consider.
- The Committee asked if a new performance measure relating to the turnover time for voids could be included, noting the proposed new Housing Allocations Policy included a target date of 21 days. It was suggested that this may be an area for the Housing Scrutiny Committee to consider.
- The Committee asked if a new performance measure relating to the occupancy rates of cycle storage lockers could be included in future reports. Officers agreed to consider this further.
- A member asked if future reports would list performance indicators under the new officer management structure. In response, it was advised that the report would need revision, although this may be from the start of the next financial year.
- It was advised that performance indicators were being developed for the Challenging Inequalities programme and these would be incorporated into future performance monitoring reports.
- A member asked if officers thought that any other performance measures should be included in the report that were not currently captured. In response, no particular performance matters were identified, although it was noted that the narrative structure of the report allowed issues to be highlighted as they arose.

RESOLVED:

That the corporate performance report be noted.

ACTIONS:

That further information be requested on:

- The scrutiny of fairer together hubs
- Further detail on homelessness prevention
- Care leavers in stable accommodation
- Vaccine hesitancy
- Possible performance indicators relating to damp and mould
- Turnover of voids
- Occupancy of cycle storage

82 MONITORING ITEM (Item C5)

The Chair noted that the scrutiny response tracker had been circulated shortly before the meeting.

On point 24 of the tracker, the performance indicators relating to the Challenging Inequality programme, a member noted that the service had supplied proposed priority outcomes, rather than performance measures, and asked that this be reviewed and an update be provided.

The meeting ended at 10.05 pm

CHAIR