

London Borough of Islington

Policy and Performance Scrutiny Committee - 24 July 2023

Non-confidential minutes of the meeting of the Policy and Performance Scrutiny Committee held at Council Chamber, Town Hall, Upper Street, N1 2UD on 24 July 2023 at 7.30 pm.

Present: **Councillors:** Williamson (Chair), Convery (Vice-Chair),
Chowdhury, Jackson, Clarke, Chapman, McHugh,
Ibrahim, Pandor, Weekes, Staff and Hamdache

Also Present: **Councillors:** Ward

Councillor Flora Williamson in the Chair

118 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Item A1)

None.

119 DECLARATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (Item A2)

None.

120 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (Item A3)

None.

121 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING (Item A4)

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the previous meeting held on 8 June 2023 be agreed as a correct record and the Chair be authorised to sign them.

122 CHAIR'S REPORT (Item A6)

The Chair noted that a query had arisen over if the scrutiny of the medical points awarded under the Housing Allocations Scheme was a matter for the Housing Scrutiny Committee, or Health and Care Scrutiny Committee. It was agreed that this would be a matter for the Housing Scrutiny Committee to consider, if it was minded to do so.

123 PUBLIC QUESTIONS (Item A7)

None.

124 UPDATE ON COMPLAINTS PERFORMANCE (Item D1)

Councillor Ward, Executive Member for Finance, Planning and Performance, introduced the report, with Dave Hodgkinson, Corporate Director – Resources, Nadeem Murtuja, Interim Corporate Director – Community Engagement and Wellbeing, and Matt West, Director of Housing Property Services.

Policy and Performance Scrutiny Committee - 24 July 2023

It was acknowledged that the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman had carried out an investigation into the council's backlog of complaints waiting for investigation at Stage Two of the corporate complaints procedure. The Ombudsman had issued a public report, finding fault with the council's complaints management performance, and had made recommendations to the council.

The Executive Member accepted the Ombudsman's findings and that the council's performance had not been good enough. It was noted that the Ombudsman had concluded that local authorities were under unprecedented pressure due to budget cuts, increasing demand, and the Covid-19 pandemic. However, this was not an excuse for the delay in processing complaints.

The Executive Member explained the key features of the Resident Experience Programme that sought to transform services for residents. This would include improvements to the council's telephone-based and face-to-face services, supported by improved technology, improvements to the council's website, and training for staff. The Committee noted that the complaints backlog had been successfully cleared, and that the resources to manage complaints had significantly increased.

The following main points were noted in the discussion:

- A member highlighted that many seemingly simple issues were escalated to elected members as casework and queried why this was the case. In response, the Executive Member suggested that the delay in processing complaints may contribute to the volume of member casework.
- Following a question, it was clarified that the council had invested an additional £350,000 into clearing the complaints backlog. A new complaints management system was being procured which would allow for greater management and oversight of complaints.
- A member queried why the complaints backlog escalated to the extent it did. In response, the Executive Member commented that there were several factors, including insufficient resources, increased demand, and issues with oversight. A new project manager had been appointed to manage the backlog and it was commented this was progressing well.
- A member queried the cause of member complaints. In response, it was advised that there was no single issue driving the complaints backlog, however a new omnichannel solution would allow for greater oversight of communications with the council and should help issues to be resolved faster.
- It was queried if organisational culture and the shift to working from home had contributed to the complaints backlog. In response, the Executive Member could not comment on if home working was a factor or not, but if the council had the right systems in place, it should not matter where staff are based.
- Following a question, it was confirmed that all 44 overdue complaints had received a response, as required by the Ombudsman report.
- In relation to staff training on managing complaints, it was commented that there was previously no corporate budget for staff training and development. A budget had since been introduced as well as a new learning and development system.
- A member commented on the volume of casework received and the seriousness of the issues raised, and queried how members could best support vulnerable residents contacting them for support. In response, the Executive Member commented that investing in the new complaints management system should ensure that simple issues are dealt with swiftly, so that staff can spend more time dealing with complex issues. It was hoped that this may lead to a reduction in member casework.

Policy and Performance Scrutiny Committee - 24 July 2023

- A member reported issues with residents attempting to contact the council by telephone but not being able to get through, and asked if investment should be made in front line services, such as plumbers and electricians, to get issues right first time. In response, the Executive Member emphasised the importance of having robust background systems in place to support transactions with residents.
- Officers noted that changes to the website were being made immediately and Access Islington Hubs, where residents can attend in person to seek advice and support, had soft-launched in December.
- A member suggested that the poor complaints system was symptomatic of wider issues in service delivery. It was suggested that routing correspondence through the contact centre may not be a satisfactory way to resolve issues swiftly. In response, the Executive Member commented on the importance of channel shift, and if basic transactional correspondence can be dealt with via the website, then this should reduce the volume of complaints. The member commented on the need to take an early invention and prevention approach, getting to the root cause of issues that matter to residents to stop routine issues becoming complaints.
- A member asked if there were common features among the delayed complaints, or if a particular group was disproportionately impacted by the delays. In response, officers advised that the demographic information held on residents was not comprehensive. The Director of Housing Property Services commented that many complaints are related to housing repairs, although those delayed represented a range of complex issues. 85% of housing repairs were completed on time, but it was acknowledged that the council needed to communicate when a repair would take longer than expected. It was also commented that there had been a spike in demand for housing repairs following the easing of Covid restrictions.
- A member suggested that some residents may find it difficult to raise complaints if they are not confident with using mobile phones or English is not their first language. It was considered important to retain opportunities for face-to-face communication with residents. The Executive Member confirmed that Access Islington Hubs allowed for issues to be raised in person.
- It was queried, if the complaint backlog had now been resolved, why a new system was needed. The Executive Member emphasised that it was important to ensure that simple transactional issues could be dealt with swiftly, so staff time can be better spent on resolving complex issues.

The Committee thanked Councillor Ward and officers for the presentation and requested that an update be submitted to the committee in six months' time.

RESOLVED:

- (i) That the Committee notes the Executive agreed to the following recommendations;
 - (a) To note the contents of this report and the LGSCO's public report dated 2 May 2023 and the recommendations made by the LGSCO, as set out in Appendix 1 of the report;
 - (b) To note the requirement for the public report to be considered in full by the Executive in accordance with the Local Government Act 1974;
 - (c) To note the agreed remedial actions already taken by officers in response to the LGSCO's recommendations (paragraph 3.6 of the report).
 - (d) To note and approve the proposal to progress the completion of those agreed remedial actions which are yet to be completed by officers (paragraph 3.6 of the report).

Policy and Performance Scrutiny Committee - 24 July 2023

- (ii) That the advertisements published in the Islington Gazette, dated 15 June 2023, and Islington Tribune, dated 16 June 2023, be noted.

ACTIONS:

A further update on the resident experience programme to be scheduled for a future meeting.

125

CORPORATE PERFORMANCE - YEAR END 2022-23 (Item D2)

Paul Clarke, Director of Finance, and Dave Hodgkinson, Corporate Director – Resources, introduced the report.

The following main points were noted in the discussion:

- A member noted sickness absence related to mental health issues and queried why sickness absence was particularly high for the Homes and Neighbourhoods directorate. In response, officers indicated the range of mental health and wellbeing support available to staff, including the Employee Assistant Programme, wellbeing activities, and guidance to managers on how to support wellbeing through the new Check-In process. It was commented that Homes and Neighbourhoods and Environment tended to have higher levels of sickness absence and officers were working to bring down levels of absence.
- It was commented that the Committee may wish to review the implementation of the workforce strategy in future.
- A member noted that the number of agency workers had increased over recent years and queried the actions being taken to reduce this number. In response, officers confirmed that the council was committed to a permanent workforce where possible and noted initiatives to move temporary staff into permanent employment. Officers also commented on the difficulties in recruiting permanent staff to some specialised roles, particularly in areas such as Digital Services.
- A member queried the actions taken when complaints were upheld. In response, it was advised that feedback was provided to staff, and the particular actions would depend on the circumstances of the case.
- A member requested more granular detail on staff sickness absence, including an analysis of the time taken off, any patterns to sick leave, the roles with higher levels of absence, if roles are desk based or manual workers, demographic data, and so on. It was agreed that an update would be submitted to a future meeting.
- In response to a question, it was advised that the Council had not explored the possibility of a four-day-week, as adopted by South Cambridgeshire Council.

RESOLVED:

That the Corporate Performance data be noted.

ACTIONS:

A detailed update on staff sickness absence to be scheduled for a future meeting.

126

BUDGET MONITORING REPORT - YEAR END 2022-23 (Item D3)

Rachel Harrison, Deputy Director of Finance, introduced the report.

It was noted that the covering report had been omitted from the agenda pack and would be resubmitted to the next meeting.

The following main points were noted in the discussion:

- Officers highlighted the increased pressure on children's social care placements due to increased demand, and the decrease in parking income. There had been a £1.2m overspend on energy associated with the high price of gas and electricity. There was a capital overspend on leisure services due to the unexpected flood damage to the Sobell Leisure Centre.
- A member asked if the council had factored in a fall in parking income associated with the council's People Friendly Streets schemes. Officers advised that projections for future income would need to be assessed to consider lower car usage.
- It was confirmed that the council's £1m hardship fund was still open and the scope of the scheme had been extended to allow applications from those on Universal Credit. A member suggested that targeted spend on those in housing and council tax arrears may be more helpful, however the Executive Member for Finance, Planning and Performance disagreed, noting the range of support already available through the Resident Support Scheme. The hardship fund was intended for those working and in private rented accommodation.
- A member queried how the overspend in Adult Social Care compared to similar local authorities, and what was being done to address the overspend. In response, officers commented on the relatively higher cost of providing care in inner-London, noted the work undertaken by Finance Officers and Adult Social Care to develop savings plans, and commented that the financing of Adult Social Care was a national issue. Members suggested that national reform of Adult Social Care financing was needed.

RESOLVED:

That the Budget Monitoring Report be noted.

127 APPROVAL OF SCRUTINY INITIATION DOCUMENT - ASB REVIEW (Item D4)

The Committee noted the aims and objectives of the review and the proposed evidence sessions.

RESOLVED:

That the Scrutiny Initiation Document be approved.

128 MONITORING REPORT (Item D5)

The Chairs of the council's scrutiny committees summarised their main reviews for 2023-24, as follows:

- Children's Services Scrutiny Committee: Children's Workforce;
- Health and Care Scrutiny Committee: Access to Primary Care and Adult Social Care;
- Housing Scrutiny Committee: New Build Programme;
- Environment and Regeneration Scrutiny Committee: Active Travel.

The meeting ended at 9.30 pm

CHAIR