

London Borough of Islington

Policy and Performance Scrutiny Committee - 11 December 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 11 December 2023 at 7.30 pm.

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

Also Present: Councillors: Khondoker, Ward and Woolf

Councillor Flora Williamson in the Chair

153 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Item A1)

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr McHugh.

154 DECLARATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (Item A2)

None.

155 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (Item A3)

None.

156 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING (Item A4)

RESOLVED:

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

157 CHAIR'S REPORT (Item A5)

In relation to the Scrutiny Review of Complex ASB, the Chair advised that two evidence gathering sessions had been held since the last meeting. The first was a focus group with residents to discuss their experiences of reporting anti-social behaviour and their perceptions of the council's response; the second was attendance at an Islington Housing Group meeting, a virtual forum held quarterly attended by all housing associations in the borough.

Councillor Convery summarised the session with housing associations. The housing associations in attendance had reported that, due to the severe shortage of affordable housing and inflation in the number of points needed to be offered a home through the housing register, there was significantly increased complexity of need in the cohort of new tenants. Some of these tenants needed intensive support to maintain their tenancy, however as general needs landlords, the housing associations were not always best

equipped to support those with complex needs. It was also suggested that the information provided to housing associations on tenants was not always satisfactory and greater information sharing would allow housing associations to better support their tenants. It was also commented that mediation could be an effective tool, but only in responding to very low level ASB. Mediation did not tend to work in relation to noise nuisance.

The Housing Associations had also commented that the threat of legal action or eviction rarely worked, because those with complex needs were likely to be found incapable by the courts. This could disincentivise housing associations in taking legal action.

Some housing associations had commented that the effective decriminalisation of smoking cannabis was an ongoing issue on estates that was difficult to tackle without Police intervention.

Councillor Staff summarised the evidence session with residents, noting the differing perceptions and understanding of what did and did not constitute ASB. There was confusion over how ASB should be reported and which issues should be reported to which agency. Residents did not feel that drug-taking was being taken seriously. It was also recognised that noise nuisance could have a significant impact, but could be difficult to respond to when residents have different perceptions of acceptable noise levels. The residents were sympathetic to those with mental health issues and other complex needs, although wanted reassurance that appropriate support was being offered to those in need.

The Chair thanked all councillors who had attended the evidence sessions.

The Chair also reported that she had attended a meeting with the Borough Commander alongside Councillor Chapman to discuss the placement and recruitment of Safer Schools Officers.

The Chair also reported that all scrutiny chairs had met with the Corporate Directors and Executive Members responsible for Finance, Adult Social Care and Children's Services to understand the practical management actions that were being taken to manage overspend in their departments.

158 PUBLIC QUESTIONS (Item A6)

None.

159 SCRUTINY REVIEW OF COMPLEX ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR: EVIDENCE (Item D1)

Chief Superintendent Andy Carter, Borough Commander, and Superintendent Jack May-Carter, presented to the Committee. The presentation both provided an update on actions taken locally as part of the Metropolitan Police Turnaround Plan in response to the Casey Review, and also noted the work of the Police in responding to anti-social behaviour.

Councillor Woolf, Executive Member for Community Safety, was also present for this item.

The following main points were noted in the discussion:

- The Police reported strong working relationships with the Council on ASB issues. Regular discussions were held to ensure that priorities were agreed collectively and resourced deployed accordingly.
- The Police and Council had held joint governance workshops between middle managers and senior managers in both the Police and Council to strengthen working relationships.

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- Superintended Jack May-Carter and the council's Director of Community Safety, Security and Resilience would be co-chairing a new performance management meeting around crime and anti-social behaviour to ensure effective grip and focus on outcomes. These regular meetings would commence in January 2024.
- The Police were restructuring their geography to better align to local authority localities. The new focus on North, South and Central areas of Islington would allow for better information sharing and link up with local authority colleagues.
- The Committee noted the Police's approach to responding to ASB and related governance structures, as summarised in the presentation.
- A member asked about community "walk and talk" sessions where councillors and residents can engage with the Police on issues impacting their local area. It was suggested that these could be held at a wider range of times to encourage greater and more diverse attendance from the local community. In response, it was advised that sessions were generally held on a Friday afternoon, although some evening sessions had been held to consider the night-time economy around Bunhill, and it was confirmed that the timing of the sessions would be considered in future, in conjunction with local authority colleagues. Sessions were promoted through social media and also through police contact with community groups, resident associations, and other groups. The Tollington session had a turnout of around 50 people, and there were around 15-20 attendees at a recent Finsbury Park session. The Police commented that these sessions were extremely valuable for local intelligence gathering.
- A councillor commented on police crime data, indicating that this did not suggest a recent increase in hate crime offences, whereas it was widely considered that there had been an increase in both antisemitism and islamophobia arising from the ongoing Israel-Gaza conflict. In response, it was considered that there had been an increase in hate crime, however reporting levels were low. The data in the presentation, which indicated a 0.6% decrease in hate crimes, was a comparison of the previous two years to December 2023, so it was suggested that the reporting cycle would not necessarily reflect a recent surge in hate crimes. Cllr Woolf commented on the importance of community reassurance work by both the Council and Police.
- A councillor asked how high priority wards were identified. In response, it was advised that Finsbury Park, Laycock, Junction and Bunhill were identified as high priority wards, which would be assigned a sergeant, four constables and seven PCSOs. Prioritisation was linked to crime data and other analysis.
- The Committee asked about responsibility for responding to ASB, and the threshold at which an instance of ASB became a police matter. In response, it was advised that there ASB could be classified as a crime or abuse, then it would be a matter for the Police to respond to. However, through strong partnership work with the local authority, instances were reviewed collectively to ensure that the correct agency responded to local ASB issues.
- The Metropolitan Police had taken up the council's offer to provide Equality, Diversity and Inclusivity training to Police staff. A councillor asked if any feedback had been received from Police colleagues. In response, it was advised that feedback had been predominantly positive. The training had been delivered to 261 people. The next stage would be conferences held in January, co-designed between the Police and local authority, to focus on policing issues and also the lived experiences of residents.
- A member asked how many cases of ASB were linked to addiction or mental health issues, and if the Police took a trauma informed approach to responding to these issues. In response, it was advised that the Police would need to review data and report back to a future meeting, however the Police, working with the Council and health partners, had a focus on drug treatment and diversion. On mental health

“Right Care Right Person” had been rolled out in November 2023 and the Police no longer responded to mental health related callouts where a crime was not being committed or a person was not at risk of harm. This reduction in demand had saved 34,000 police officer hours which allowed resources to be used elsewhere. The Committee also asked for further data on which interventions were the most effective in responding to ASB among different cohorts.

- A member raised an issue around ASB affecting a local business in his ward, and also instances of some key workers and older people feeling unsafe in the evenings. In response, the Police summarised the increased resource allocated to hotspot areas to tackle crime and anti-social behaviour and the importance of reporting crimes.
- The Committee noted that the local policing unit had responsibility for both Camden and Islington and a member asked about the differences between the boroughs; why did ASB appear to be lower in Islington compared to Camden, if there was an operational difference between the approaches of both boroughs, and if Islington could learn anything from Camden colleagues. In response, it was advised that Islington Council made use of an ASB “early warning system” and, although this would not explain all differences between the boroughs, this appeared to be having a positive result. It was known that Tower Hamlets had a similar system and this had a similar effect. It was commented that Islington and Camden had broadly similar approaches to working with social landlords and case management systems, and there were several similarities between the boroughs. Islington had recently undertaken a major review of its ASB work, and the Police welcomed that Islington was receptive and open to feedback during this review.
- A member asked, if the Police could change one thing to improve ASB in Islington, what would it be. In response, it was advised that greater performance management data that made use of both qualitative and quantitative data would allow issues to be resolved in a more effective and timely way. It was also suggested that having greater public awareness over which authority was best placed to respond to particular issues, and clear expectations around outcomes, would help to reassure the community.

The Committee thanked the Police for their attendance.

ACTIONS:

- Police to be asked for data on ASB callouts where mental health or addiction is a factor.

160

ANNUAL PRESENTATION - EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR EQUALITIES, CULTURE AND INCLUSION (Item D2)

Councillor Khondoker, Executive Member for Equalities, Culture and Inclusion, presented to the Committee. Raj Chand, Corporate Director for Community Engagement and Wellbeing, attended virtually for this item.

The following main points were noted in the discussion:

- The Committee noted the senior officer turnover in the Community Engagement and Wellbeing directorate over recent months; Raj Chand had been recently appointed as the Corporate Director and had joined Islington the previous month.
- The Executive Member summarised the approach to monitoring, reviewing, evaluating and communicating equalities actions across the organisation and the need to embed an equalities approach in all council services. Each directorate had

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their own equalities action plan that was linked to corporate priorities. The Committee noted the difficulty of measuring the success of some outcomes.

- The Executive Member commented on the importance of scrutiny and feedback on council services, this provided helpful information to help make council services more inclusive.
- The Executive Member summarised a range of initiatives from across the organisation, including work to diversify the council's supply chains, work to support business owners from minority ethnic communities, support to community organisations, and delivery of the Black Cultural Centre.
- The Corporate Director emphasised the importance of ensuring that all council services considered equalities issues and built this in to their service delivery.
- A councillor commented on the importance of taking a strategic approach to equalities issues, and noted that councillors were often asked to contribute Local Initiatives Funding to support important cultural events. It was suggested that these events should receive core council funding, rather than rely on individual councillors making contributions. The scarcity of resources was noted in response, although it was suggested that there may be scope to work with other organisations to pool resources to ensure the maximum impact. While the council would like to fund more community events through core budget, the financial challenges facing the council were significant.
- A member noted the importance of the Black Cultural Centre, commenting that equalities often considered communities with English as a second language, whereas Black communities also needed culturally sensitive services. The Executive Member provided a progress update on the development of the centre and noted the importance of upskilling community groups to help them to deliver advice and support to the communities they serve. Cllr Khondoker referenced a report and the Committee asked that it be made publicly available.
- A member noted the officer turnover in the Community Engagement and Wellbeing directorate and asked if there was a long-term strategic plan to ensure key roles were filled. In response, it was noted that recruitment to vacant roles would begin shortly.
- A member asked how the Executive Member could hold other services to account if they were not delivering on their commitments to challenge inequality. The Executive Member commented that responsibility for delivering on equalities issues rested with individual departments, however the Executive Member and the Equalities Team had a key oversight role in enabling services to promote equalities, monitoring outcomes and challenging when appropriate. The Corporate Director summarised the governance structures for monitoring equalities work and noted that she was keen to introduce a more formalised assessment against the local government equalities framework. This could also lead to a peer review.
- Following a question on how effective Equality Champions had been, it was commented that it was important for council services to have champions to lead on particular issues within their service. It was intended to hold regular meetings for officers to discuss the progress of their department's equality action plans, any issues and to collectively problem-solve.
- A member raised that the council's leisure centres had discontinued specific swimming sessions for Muslim women, whereas this was offered in neighbouring boroughs. The Executive Member advised that she had worked with the service to ensure that these would be reinstated, and also summarised recent consultation with Muslim women to discuss the challenges they face. This had identified safety concerns and the Community Safety team was reviewing how best to support Muslim women to feel safe. This could include reviewing reporting mechanisms for hate crimes, and continued specific engagement with the community.

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- A discussion was had on the need for equalities to be “built in, not bolted on” to council services. Services needed upskilling on equalities issues and it was suggested that the council could mainstream equalities performance reporting into corporate performance indicators. The Committee emphasised on the importance of data and commented it was difficult to scrutinise the council’s performance without strong performance information on particular interventions and if they were effective or not. While the council had many commendable initiatives to promote equalities, clarity was needed on performance outcomes and how these would meet corporate priorities.
- The Executive Member agreed that increased data would support the council in implementing tangible measures targeted at specific outcomes, and would also allow for particular services to be held to account on their performance. It was advised that this would be considered further.
- The Chair suggested that the Committee may be able to review departmental equalities action plans at its February meeting.

The Committee thanked Councillor Khondoker for her attendance.

ACTIONS:

- The Chair, Executive Member and relevant officers to review the Committee’s work plan with a view to considering departmental equality action plans.
- The report on the Black Cultural Centre to be made available to the Committee.

161

BUDGET MONITOR - QUARTER 2 2023-24 (Item D3)

Councillor Ward, Executive Member for Finance, Planning and Performance, and Rachel Harrison, Deputy Director of Finance, introduced the report.

Dave Hodgkinson, Corporate Director of Resources, and Tony Ralph, Director of Environment and Commercial Operations, and Rubena Hafizi, Head of Parking Operations, were also in attendance.

The following main points were noted in the discussion:

- Adult Social Care and Children’s Services continued to be overspent. The Committee noted continued increased demand for services, increasing complexity of need, significant placement pressures, and increased transport costs. The financial balances of schools also remained a significant concern.
- Environment was reporting a £9m budget pressure, primarily associated with a loss of parking income. Parking income had not recovered as expected following the pandemic. It was advised that the Finance team was working closely with the Parking service around this issue.
- The Committee expressed concern at the significant variance in parking income and a discussion was had on the reasons behind this. While the council had introduced environmental policies to disincentivise car use in the borough, a member suggested that such a significant financial impact could not be attributed to the council’s policies. If parking income did not recover, then this decrease in income would need to be factored into future budgets. Officers agreed that a sustained decrease in parking income would be a challenge for future budgets.
- A member noted that budget monitoring reports used to be produced monthly, and expressed some concern at the timeliness of the new quarterly reporting cycle. Officers explained that producing the monthly monitoring report had significant resource implications, and moving to quarterly reporting provided capacity for offers

to undertake other financial assurance work, for example the current deep-dive on the parking income.

- Officers summarised the management actions underway in the parking service to increase income. It was noted that the decrease in parking income was mirrored across London. There were a number of factors associated with the decrease, including increased working from home, people choosing more sustainable travel options, and a decrease in car ownership. Islington had the lowest level of car ownership in London.
- Islington had previously moved to emissions-based parking charges, with more polluting vehicles charged more, and it was thought that some drivers had chosen to use more environmentally friendly vehicles as a result.
- A councillor suggested that more micro-level analysis of car ownership and usage trends may be useful. It was asked if there were any ward-level learnings on the impacts of implementing low traffic neighbourhoods. In response, it was advised that the impact of low traffic neighbourhoods were closely monitored.
- A member noted that the report referenced 1,000 gas boilers being replaced; it was asked if these would be replaced with gas boilers, or better cleaner alternatives. It was advised that a written response would be sought from the Housing service.
- A member commented that a holistic plan was needed to ensure the sustainability of adult social care and asked how much had been spent in redundancy in Adult Social Care over the past 5 years. It was advised that a written response would be sought.

RESOLVED:

That the budget monitoring report be noted.

162 UPDATE ON SICKNESS ABSENCE (Item D4)

Julie Foy, Director of HR, introduced the report.

The Committee welcomed the report and was reassured that levels of sickness absence were similar to statistical neighbours. The Committee requested a further update be submitted to a future meeting to further explore (i) the disparity between sickness absence levels in different directorates; (ii) any actions being taken to address relatively high levels of long-term sickness absence in some directorates; and (iii) if the council could do more to support the mental health of staff, given the prevalence of mental health related sickness absence.

In response to a further question on mental health support, officers explained the Mental Health Awareness training for both managers and staff, the workplace passport scheme, and that the council's management team were exploring options for implementing mandatory mental health training. The council would soon be launching a "share not declare" campaign that would seek to open up conversations around mental health in the workplace.

Following a question, officers explained the council's sickness absence policy and the relevant thresholds that would trigger a management review of sickness absence. It was confirmed that this would include reviewing patterns of absence.

The Committee thanked officers for their attendance.

RESOLVED:

That the report on sickness absence be noted.

ACTIONS:

That the scheduling of a future update be discussed with officers.

163 LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND SOCIAL CARE OMBUDSMAN (LGSCO) ANNUAL REVIEW PERFORMANCE REPORT 2022-2023 (Item D5)

Councillor Ward, Executive Member for Finance, Planning and Performance, introduced the report. It was noted that the Committee had previously considered the shortcomings in the council's complaints process and the concerning delay to responses being received.

The Executive Member summarised the improvements made to the council's complaints processes and emphasised the importance of effective and modern communication systems so residents did not resort to submitting complaints as a method of communication.

A councillor asked what length of time the Executive Member considered to be appropriate for a response. In response, it was confirmed the corporate target was ten working days. Although not all responses were submitted within this time frame, performance was monitored on a weekly basis.

A member noted the similarity of two complaints relating to domestic violence and homelessness and it was suggested that it was important the council learnt from these cases.

It was noted that an update on the resident experience programme was scheduled for the next meeting.

RESOLVED:

- (i) That the Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman Annual Review letter 2022-23 dated 19 July 2023, be noted.
- (ii) It be noted that, of the 17 cases investigated, there were 12 upheld decisions with the remaining 5 cases not upheld.
- (iii) It be noted that, 2 out of the 12 upheld cases, received a satisfactory remedy before the Ombudsman involvement.
- (iv) It be noted that 6 out of the 6 cases with compliance outcomes during 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023, 100% complied with the Ombudsman recommendations.
- (v) It be noted that separate to the complaints investigated by the LGSCO reported in the Annual Review Letter, 6 upheld decisions during the period in question (finding of maladministration) were decided by the Housing Ombudsman,

164 MONITORING ITEM (Item D6)

Noted.

The meeting ended at 10.15 pm

CHAIR

