

London Borough of Islington

Policy and Performance Scrutiny Committee - 21 September 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 21 September 2023 at 7.30 pm.

Present: Councillors: Williamson (Chair), Chowdhury, Jackson, Clarke, McHugh, Ibrahim, Pandor, Weekes, Staff and Hamdache

Also Present: Councillors: Comer-Schwartz, Ward, Woolf.

Councillor Flora Williamson in the Chair

129 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Item A1)

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Chapman and Convery.

130 DECLARATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (Item A2)

None.

131 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (Item A3)

None.

132 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING (Item A4)

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the previous meeting held on 24 July 2023 be agreed as a correct record and the Chair be authorised to sign them.

133 CHAIR'S REPORT (Item A5)

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting and highlighted the proposed review of the council's scrutiny function, set out elsewhere on the agenda.

134 PUBLIC QUESTIONS (Item A6)

None.

135 LEADER OF THE COUNCIL - ANNUAL PRESENTATION (Item D1)

Councillor Kaya Comer-Schwartz, Leader of the Council, addressed the Committee and focused on the council's agreed priorities in the new Corporate Plan, Islington Together 2030, and the challenges facing the Council.

The Leader highlighted the outcomes of the Lets Talk Islington engagement exercise; this survey of over 6,000 residents found that nearly half of respondents did not believe Islington

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was a fair and equal place to live, the differences in income and opportunities were the biggest sources of inequality, and affordable housing and safety were the top priorities of residents. These findings had informed the Islington Together 2030 plan.

The Leader highlighted three issues that were the root cause of inequality; poverty and affordability, quality of life, and power and agency. The Corporate Plan sought to address these through its five priorities; child-friendly Islington, fairer together, a safe place to call home, community wealth building, and greener, healthier Islington.

The Leader commented on the financial challenges facing the council following continued government austerity and noted that recent findings from the Housing Ombudsman and Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman had indicated where the council needed to improve services for residents. In particular, the Leader highlighted the impact of damp and mould in council housing, and the work underway to clear the council's complaints backlog. Since the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman's report found fault in the council's complaints management, the council had invested in transforming its communications with residents, and call waiting times had been cut by 66%.

The Leader commented on the importance of the council's Challenging Inequality programme and the need to embed this approach in all of the council's activities to address inequalities head-on. The Leader highlighted several examples of the council adopting best practice, including the council's pioneering approach to Community Wealth Building, its dedication to the natural environment and Net Zero Carbon, the council's focus on health inequalities through projects such as the Young Black Men and Mental Health Programme, and noted that Islington led the way nationally in the roll out of school streets and encouraging sustainable transport. The council was also prioritising services to support young people and keep them safe.

The following main points were noted in the discussion:

- Following a question on the role of Access Islington Hubs, it was confirmed that these Hubs offered advice for those experiencing financial hardship, provided by the council's Income Maximisation (IMAX) team.
- A member asked about the council's support for those with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) and if the council was effectively communicating its offer in this area. In response, the Leader highlighted the importance of universal services, such as free school meals for primary school children, and noted that the size of the NRPF team had tripled over recent years. NRPF services were promoted through social workers and schools.
- A member welcomed the council's ambition but commented on the limited funding available to local authorities. It was queried what scope the council had to lobby central government for a fairer funding deal. In response, the Leader commented that the council had recently recruited a public affairs team to support the council in lobbying central government and others. It was important for councils to work together at a regional and national level to lobby for increased funding for priority issues.
- A member asked what the Leader's biggest concern was. The Leader responded that the budget was the most pressing issue at the moment; as after years of government austerity, the options for further cuts in services were limited, particularly while demand was increasing. It was essential to focus on early intervention, consider doing things differently, and to prioritise key services. The Leader would always prioritise residents and frontline services, and it was important to listen to residents to make sure the council was delivering services in an effective way that met their needs.

- Councillor Ward, Deputy Leader of the Council, contributed to the discussion, and noted the council's resident experience programme that sought to transform communication with residents. A new council telephone system would go live the following week which would make a significant difference in interactions with the council.
- A member asked how the council could best support struggling local businesses, how the council can encourage local businesses to employ Islington residents, and if it was possible to give local businesses training on how to take part in procurement exercises. In response, the Leader summarised the work of the Community Wealth Building department, including the distribution of grants to local businesses, and the importance of considering social value in procurement. The council also had a role in brokering contracts between local institutions and local businesses, supporting residents into employment, and helping to support employability through skills development.
- A member commented on the range of challenges faced by local authorities and asked if the Leader was confident that the council had the right team in place to address these. In response, the Leader commented on the recent senior officer recruitment and that she was excited to have new and diverse voices around the table. The Leader also commented on the difficulties faced by the sector; and that almost all local authorities were facing financial challenges. It was essential to act with financial prudence, consider different ways of working, and act responsibly by managing risks.
- A member asked about the need to take difficult decisions and the Leader's "red lines"; in response, the Leader spoke of the importance of safety and the need to protect vulnerable children and adults.
- A member queried the council's agreed budget savings and noted that £4.1m of savings were currently RAG rated Red and Amber; it was asked if the council had been too ambitious in its savings proposals, and if future savings were going to be more difficult to achieve as a result. In response, the Leader emphasised the importance of setting a balanced budget and it was crucial to manage the council's finances carefully. Councils that had issued Section 114 notices had faced government intervention, and decisions had been taken out of the hands of local councillors. The Council had a responsibility to make sure this never happened.
- Following a question, the Leader commented on the importance of robust emergency planning, particularly around major events.

The Committee thanked the Leader for her attendance.

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SCRUTINY REVIEW: MULTI-AGENCY RESPONSE TO COMPLEX ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR - INTRODUCTORY PRESENTATION (Item D2)

Councillor John Woolf, Executive Member for Community Safety, Besserat Atsebaha, Director of Community Safety, Security and Resilience, Daniel Lawson, Assistant Director – Civil Protection, and Rosalind Hick, ASB Programme Manager, presented to the Committee on the council's response to complex ASB.

The following main points were noted in the discussion:

- The Executive Member commented on the importance of getting the basics right in terms of case management and reporting mechanisms. It was important to remember that ASB was subjective and different activities may have different impacts on different residents. The council did not have the same powers to intervene as the police, but could tackle ASB effectively by having clear and consistent policies, procedures and practices. The Executive Member highlighted

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Islington's commitment to early intervention, the need to take a contextual approach, and commented on the need for a zero-tolerance approach to anti-social behaviour.

- Officers highlighted that responding to ASB effectively was a high priority for residents and was identified as the second highest priority in the recent Lets Talk Islington resident engagement survey. This priority was reflected in member casework. Service demand had recently returned to pre-Covid levels and the majority of reports related to noise nuisance and neighbour issues.
- The majority of ASB reporting was now via the webform; this was a new trend, as previously the majority of reports were made by telephone. Reports peaked between 10.00pm and midnight when people were trying to sleep, and the summer was busier than the winter, as people gathered in parks and public spaces late into the evening.
- Officers summarised the ASB Programme that was seeking to transform the way that the council manages and responds to ASB. This work included introducing a new definition of ASB. It was essential to have a clear definition of ASB so residents and partners knew what the council would and would not respond to. It was also important that ASB was dealt with by the correct agency; where ASB involved criminal activity this should be referred to the Police; ASB on social housing estates should be directed to the relevant housing provider.
- The Committee noted the statutory Community Trigger process which allowed residents to call for a review of persistent ASB issues if they felt these were not being addressed sufficiently.
- A new ASB case management system was being introduced to assist with monitoring and managing ASB.
- The Committee considered a map of ASB "hotspots". A hotspot was classified as an area with six or more reports of ASB. These changed frequently, however some areas were persistently classified as hotspots, particularly town centres, transport hubs, and parks during summer.
- A new webform was being developed to support better reporting of ASB. The Committee asked for an update on when this would be available.
- A member commented on the decrease in telephone calls reporting ASB and queried if the system had been designed to discourage people from reporting by telephone. In response, officers advised that there had been a corresponding increase in online reporting, and it was thought that residents were choosing to report ASB through their preferred contact method. The service was exploring other options for reporting ASB, including WhatsApp and the use of an app that would allow photos and videos to be uploaded. It was important to have a range of reporting methods available to residents and the telephone system had recently been upgraded to make it easier to report over the phone.
- A member commented that ASB can be subjective and it was important that ASB interventions did not effectively criminalise young people, particularly groups of young Black and Asian men, simply for congregating in public spaces. It was asked how officers review reports of ASB and if the council had data on how many reports of ASB were rejected. In response, the Executive Member commented on the importance of defining ASB and being very clear on what the council would and would not respond to. It was important to consider equalities issues in all council services, and in particular the ASB team worked closely with the Targeted Youth Support team to ensure that issues were considered from a youth perspective.
- A member suggested that the design of some estates could be improved to make them feel more welcoming and this may reduce instances of ASB; it was thought that fencing and locked gates could make spaces feel hostile. In response, the Executive Member referenced the "broken window theory" that neglected spaces can attract ASB, and summarised how addressing low level issues like graffiti and littering could make communities feel safer.

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- A member asked how the council worked in partnership with housing associations to tackle ASB on their estates. In response, it was advised that the council is able to lobby and influence housing providers when ASB was having a detrimental impact on residents, however it was important to be clear that the council did not have enforcement powers on estates managed by housing associations. Officers noted that they were working to develop strong positive working relationships with colleagues in local housing associations.
- It was confirmed that the ASB Team worked with colleagues in Adult Social Care around ASB issues that involved their service users. These situations tended to involve vulnerable people and had to be addressed carefully.
- A member noted longstanding ASB issues in their ward and queried if the council had sufficient resources to resolve ASB issues effectively. In response, the Executive Member commented on the investment made in the ASB Programme to transform the way the council manages ASB, however also noted the difficulties of resolving complex cases of ASB, particularly when the perpetrator had mental health issues or other vulnerabilities. It could also take time to resolve issues when a court order was required, due to the backlog in the justice system. In such cases it was important to continue to report issues, and report to the police when appropriate if ASB issues continued to escalate.
- The Committee noted partnership work with other council services and partners, including Parkguard, Arsenal in the Community, voluntary sector organisations and youth centres. An intensive partnership approach was appropriate following a major incident; partners had worked closely together to reassure the community following the double murder around the Elthorne Estate in late June.
- Following a question, it was advised that there was some overlap between ASB hotspots and deprivation and social inequalities certainly impacted on prevalence of ASB. However, hotspots were also focused around transport hubs, town centres, the Emirates Stadium, and other busy areas. As the Council did not have responsibility for responding to ASB issues on housing association estates, these did not display as hotspots on the map, even if there was a high level of ASB.
- It was thought that reporting of ASB was lower than the true figure and there may be hotspots that were not known to council services. Some residents were not comfortable in reporting issues to the council or police and further work was needed to reassure residents to provide confidence in reporting. It was suggested that developing new reporting routes might lead to new hotspots being identified.
- Hotspots were identified from both reports to the ASB team and reports to the Police. The service was working to incorporate Housing data and this would further develop the hotspot data and would assist with targeting future interventions.
- Following a question on thresholds for intervention, the Executive Member reiterated the importance of defining ASB. Occasionally the council would receive ASB reports around the noise of children playing or other minor issues which were not considered to meet the threshold. It was important to take a common-sense approach and to ensure that staff on estates, such as caretakers, had a clear understanding of ASB definitions so they could provide accurate advice to residents.
- A member expressed concern about the variety of responses to ASB from different housing providers, commenting that all residents deserved to have their cases dealt with fairly and consistently. In response, it was advised that the council worked to engage and influence housing providers, but the council did not have enforcement powers.
- A member commented on the importance of prevention, highlighting an example of a faulty light in a communal area. This had been reported several months ago but had not been fixed, and as the area was now dark at night, had turned into an ASB hotspot. It was commented that some vulnerable people did not trust authorities and

would never report issues to the police or council; it was suggested that further engagement with the voluntary sector may help with the reporting of such issues.

- Officers advised that they were investigating the feasibility of anonymous reporting.
- A member noted that building confidence in the council's ASB response was a priority for the service and queried how this increase in confidence would be measured. In response, it was suggested that an increase in reporting would be indicative of increased confidence, and the council would also seek feedback through community meetings and satisfaction surveys. These would be measured through KPIs.

The Committee thanked Councillor Woolf and officers for their attendance.

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BUDGET MONITOR - 01 2023-24 (Item D3)

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

It was highlighted that there was an overspend of £12m in the general fund. A major factor was the availability of care beds and this was being monitored and challenged internally. The challenging financial position of local schools was also highlighted, with several expected to be in deficit in the next financial year. The Committee also noted slippage in the capital programme. The importance of robust financial management was emphasised, particularly following Birmingham City Council issuing a Section 114 notice.

The following main points were noted in the discussion:

- Members asked why the council employed so many agency staff. In response, it was advised that several agency staff had been recruited to address the complaints backlog that had been subject to a review by the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman. This was a short-term measure. The number of agency staff employed by the council was below the London average. It was accepted that there would always be a need to recruit agency staff to cover vacancies in front line services, but this should be kept to a minimum.
- It was noted that further information on the unavailability of care beds was set out in the Exempt Appendix.
- Following a question on the budget implications of having a relatively low recycling rate, it was commented that the council could take radical decisions to improve the recycling rate, for example switching to alternate weekly bin collections, but there would be wider consequences to this policy decision.
- A member asked about the financial savings associated with greening measures, for example implementing LED lighting. In response, it was advised that a full response would be sought from the Environment department.
- A member asked about the overspend in Adult Social Care and what was being done to develop sustainable capacity in the service. In response, it was commented that Adult Social Care financing was a national issue, however a range of transformation measures were underway. There was a need for extra care beds and this needed to be addressed through the planning system. There would be 60 care units accommodated on the new Holloway Prison development.
- A member commented on the government's watering down of net zero commitments and commented on the difficulty of local authorities delivering environmental improvements without financial support from central government. The Executive Member commented that retrofitting social housing with energy saving measures would help to save residents' money on energy bills, provide higher quality homes, address persistent damp and mould issues, improve living standards, health and wellbeing, and boost the economy by providing new highly skilled jobs. However, it

would be challenging to deliver the changes needed while the government did not prioritise these measures.

- The Committee noted that £4.1m of the agreed £10.9m of savings were RAG rated with Amber or Red. It was advised that an amber rating identified some level of risk, and it would be for senior decision-makers to ensure those savings were delivered.

RESOLVED:

That the Quarter 1 Budget Monitoring Report be noted.

138 BUDGET MONITOR - YEAR END 2022-23 (Item D4)

Noted.

139 COST OF LIVING CRISIS SCRUTINY REVIEW - FINAL REPORT (Item D5)

RESOLVED:

That the final report of the Cost of Living Crisis Scrutiny Review be agreed and submitted to the Executive.

140 PROPOSED REVIEW OF SCRUTINY (Item D6)

The Chair introduced the report and advised that the Scrutiny Committee Chairs would review the council's scrutiny arrangements. Any final proposals would be submitted to Council for approval.

RESOLVED:

- a) That the draft project plan, including the review terms of reference and timeline, be approved as attached at Appendix 1 to the report.
- b) To establish an informal member project board, chaired by the Chair of Policy and Performance Scrutiny Committee.

141 MONITORING ITEM (Item D7)

Council Forward Plan

Noted.

Scrutiny Review Tracker

Noted.

Responses from previous meetings

Noted.

Verbal Updates from Committee Chairs

The Chair of the Environment and Regeneration Scrutiny Committee advised that a task and finish group was being held on the inclusive economy.

Work Programme

Noted.

142 EXEMPT APPENDIX: BUDGET MONITOR Q1 2023-24 (Item J1)

Noted.

The meeting ended at 21:55pm

CHAIR