

London Borough of Islington

**Policy and Performance Scrutiny Committee - 2 November 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 2 November 2023 at 7.30 pm.

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

**Also Present: Councillors:** O'Halloran, Ward and Woolf.

**Councillor Flora Williamson in the Chair**

**143 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Item A1)**

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Bashir Ibrahim.

**144 DECLARATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (Item A2)**

None.

**145 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (Item A3)**

None.

**146 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING (Item A4)**

**RESOLVED:**

That the minutes of the previous meeting held on 9 September 2023 be agreed as a correct record and the Chair be authorised to sign them.

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

The Chair noted the evidence sessions scheduled as part of the scrutiny review of Complex Anti-Social Behaviour. This included a focus group with residents on 20<sup>th</sup> November and attendance at a virtual meeting with Housing Associations on 4<sup>th</sup> December. Further evidence sessions would be scheduled in due course.

**148 PUBLIC QUESTIONS (Item A6)**

None.

**149 VOLUNTARY AND COMMUNITY SECTOR ANNUAL REPORT - EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR HOMES AND COMMUNITIES (Item D1)**

Councillor Una O'Halloran, Executive Member for Homes and Communities, and Billy Wells, Assistant Director – Homes and Communities, introduced the report.

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The following main points were noted in the discussion:

- The report provided a detailed summary of the council's work to support the voluntary and community sector.
- The Executive Member noted that applications for the 2024 grants programme were currently being considered. The number of applications for financial support from voluntary sector organisations had doubled since last year.
- A member asked if some local community centres could be better utilised; it was commented that some community centres had unused office space that could be used by local people. In response, the Executive Member noted the ongoing Community Centre review. There was a broad range of community centres in Islington, some were managed by Islington Council, others were owned by the council but let to other organisations to manage, and there was considerable variation in terms of facilities and usage. The review was currently ongoing but aimed to make recommendations on how to best use these community spaces.
- A member commented that many local organisations were struggling with recruitment, with key community organisers retiring and other volunteers not willing or able to take on this workload. It was queried how the council could support people in engaging with the community and voluntary sector, particularly on tenants and residents associations. In response, officers summarised the council's work in supporting these organisations, including providing advice and training to TRA members. Although some people could only commit to an hour or so a week, it was important to provide opportunities for local people to be able to contribute as much or as little time as they were able to offer.
- Following a question on monitoring outcomes, the Executive Member summarised how VCS grant agreements were monitored and reviewed.
- A member noted the great partnership work with the voluntary sector and asked how the voluntary sector was able to provide feedback to the council and contribute to council policy. The Executive Member commented on the strong relationships built during the pandemic and the importance of genuine partnership with the voluntary sector.
- Following a question, officers summarised the investment in community facilities on estates, including outdoor football pitches, MUGAs, outdoor fitness equipment, and community garden spaces. It was important for facilities to meet local needs and officers commented on engagement with local residents, community groups and schools on how this money is invested.
- A member referenced the We Are Cally initiative, commenting that this was a comprehensive programme that involved place-based investment, dedicated staff, an engagement programme, community governance and an action plan. It was queried what could be learnt from the programme, and if a similar model could be implemented elsewhere. The Executive Member agreed that it was a good model and commented that each area would have different local partners and issues to consider if developing a similar programme of work.

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- It was suggested that some community spaces could be used to help with the provision of affordable community workspaces.
- The Committee noted community centres that were owned and managed by housing associations and other organisations; some of these were underused and one was thought to be empty. Although the council could work to influence the owners of these properties, it was confirmed that the council did not have power to change how these operate.
- Following a question, the Executive Member commented it was not possible to increase the amount of Local Initiatives Funding available; the council was facing financial challenges and it was not currently feasible to increase allocations, however it was important to work with partner organisations, including the Cripplegate Foundation, the GLA and others, to ensure that money was invested locally.
- In response to a question on supporting TRAs, officers explained work to review and simplify the TRA handbook, provide governance advice, and encourage residents to get involved.
- A member noted the relatively low turnout at ward partnership meetings and other community meetings. The Executive Member commented on the successful implementation of community drop in sessions in some wards. It was thought that traditional community meetings had limited appeal, whereas greater turnout could be achieved if meetings were linked to specific community events, particularly at weekends.
- Following a question on wi-fi access at community centres, the Executive Member confirmed that not all centres had an internet connection, and it was the responsibility of the centre management to provide these facilities if they were needed for their services.
- It was noted that the Warm Spaces initiative over the previous winter was delivered largely on the good will of partner organisations. The Executive Member thanked all organisations supporting residents with the cost of living crisis.

### RESOLVED:

That the report be noted.

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### **CORPORATE PERFORMANCE Q1 2023-24 (Item D2)**

Joanna Dawes, Corporate Performance Manager, Dave Hodgkinson, Corporate Director – Resources, and Cllr Diarmaid Ward, Executive Member for Finance, Planning and Performance, introduced the report.

The following main points were noted in the discussion:

- The collection of business rates and council tax was on track and currently above target.
- In relation to diversity in the council's workforce, the percentage of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Staff, and Disabled staff in the top 5% of earners had increased from the previous quarter. The Committee requested that this figure be provided as an absolute number, rather than a percentage.

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- The council's complaints backlog had been cleared. Developments in the council's telephone systems had decreased the amount of abandoned calls from 22% to 5%.
- A member expressed concern about the overspend in Adult Social Care and commented that the financial position may be improved through decreased usage of agency staff. In response, officers summarised the cost pressures on the department, including inflation, demographic pressures, and increased complexity of need. There was an adult social care transformation plan that sought to manage demand to improve the financial position.
- Following a question on staff redundancies, it was confirmed that the council had a voluntary redundancy scheme, however few staff in Adult Social Care would have chosen redundancy through this scheme.
- The Committee expressed concerns about levels of sickness absence and asked for detailed data and analysis of sickness rates. It was confirmed that a further detailed update on sickness absence was scheduled for the December meeting.
- A member commented on the need to convert agency staff to permanent employees. The report noted the scheme to move temporary staff onto permanent contracts if they had been with the council for more than 12 months, however members suggested that managers should have regular conversations with agency staff about moving into the council's employment far sooner than this. Officers confirmed that the council is committed to permanent recruitment; there would always be a need to recruit some agency staff to provide skills, expertise and short-term capacity, but it was accepted that the council wanted to decrease the number of staff employed through agencies.
- A member noted concerns at the findings of the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman and Housing Ombudsman over recent months, that had both found fault with the council's services. The Executive Member commented on the work underway to improve services for residents.
- In response to a query on FOI and SAR response times, officers commented on specific issues in searching and retrieving information from historic paper records, as well as insufficient central coordination of responses. The council had recently introduced a new structure that centralised the coordination of responses and it was anticipated this would lead to improvements.
- Following a question, it was confirmed that interim executive spend included both specialist and senior roles, so was not only limited to interim directors, for example.
- A member asked for further information on overtime paid to agency staff.
- The Executive Member commented that he would be interested to see the results of 4-day-week trials in local authorities, and noted his disappointment that the government was seeking to intervene how councils managed their staff. There were no current plans to implement 4-day-week trial in Islington.
- The Committee expressed concern about the council's adverse financial position, particularly overspends in Adult Social Care and Children's Services, which were particularly high for the end of Quarter 1. Officers noted the challenges facing the local government sector, and advised that the budget monitor would be submitted to the next meeting.

**RESOLVED:**

To monitor and challenge performance trends for Q1 2023/24 for Organisational Health.

**ACTIONS:**

- Statistics on council staff diversity to be provided as absolute numbers rather than as a percentage.
- A member asked for further information on overtime paid to agency staff.

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**SCRUTINY REVIEW OF COMPLEX ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR: EVIDENCE (Item D3)**

Ian Swift, Director of Housing Needs and Strategy, and Sinem Yanik, Acting Head of Housing Partnerships, presented to the committee on the work of the council's housing landlord function in managing anti-social behaviour.

The following main points were noted in the discussion:

- A high proportion of ASB was perpetrated by vulnerable residents with complex needs and it was important that local agencies worked with them in a sensitive manner. It was intended to restructure the housing management function; this would increase capacity in the service and would help to ensure the service was able to better respond to residents with complex needs.
- Enforcement action had increased recently, in the last 6 months the council had taken more enforcement action than it had in the previous 6 years.
- The council was increasing engagement with residents and had held 60 drop-in sessions, with some attended by around 80-100 people. These allowed residents to raise a range of concerns, including ASB issues.
- Officers commented on the new online ASB reporting system in development. This would allow reporting 24/7.
- Officers acknowledged that, historically, the collection of data on ASB issues raised by tenants had not been good enough. The service was focused on improving this.
- Commenting on organisational culture, officers emphasised the importance of working with residents, treating them with respect and dignity.
- There were significant backlogs in the justice system that meant seeking court orders against tenants for ASB issues was a lengthy process.
- A member asked for further details of the housing management restructure and why this had not yet been implemented. In response, officers advised that it was intended to restructure the service into 3 locality-based teams, North, Central and South, with each officer having a caseload of 550 households, rather than the 2,000 they do currently. Officers would be provided with new technology, such as iPads, to allow them to carry out tenancy audits remotely. It was commented that the job evaluation process had taken longer than anticipated, and it would not be appropriate to carry out a restructure prior to the festive period.

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- A member commented on press reports that some housing providers did not take ASB issues seriously and noted that this could have serious detrimental impacts on residents. Officers commented on the importance of culture change in the organisation; it was essential that staff understood the impact that ongoing ASB could have on residents. Staff needed to understand the impact of trauma, take a risk-based approach, and not be judgemental.
- Officers summarised the recently agreed Islington Housing Providers' Partnership that sought a consistent approach to handling ASB. Senior officers were meeting with counterparts in housing associations to discuss how to increase performance across the sector.
- A member asked for further information on the number of ASB cases linked to addiction and mental health issues. It was confirmed that addiction services had been invited to attend a future meeting.
- Officers noted that resident engagement with support services was voluntary and it could be particularly problematic when those with complex needs did not wish to engage with the support available.
- The council had evicted residents for ASB issues in the past but officers reiterated that this was an absolutely last resort and would only happen after residents are offered alternative housing options. It was essential to ensure that those evicted were not sleeping rough.
- Commenting on neighbour nuisance, officers noted that simple practical things could avoid issues, such as fitting carpets to reduce noise between floors.
- A number of mandatory training courses were being rolled out to support culture change in the department. Officers were also assessing performance through mystery shopping exercises and focus groups.
- It was thought that 50% of council tenants had a specific vulnerability, however it was accepted that data on the particular needs of residents was not currently good enough.
- A discussion was had on if it was possible to share some details with neighbouring residents when the council was engaging with a vulnerable person who was a perpetrator of ASB. Although the council must be mindful of data protection and the right to privacy, it was thought that some acknowledgement from the council that they were aware of local ASB issues and explaining that appropriate action was being taken would help to reassure residents.

The Committee thanked officers for their attendance.

### 152 **MONITORING ITEM (Item D4)**

Noted.

The meeting ended at 9:40pm

**CHAIR**