



## OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MINUTES

Monday 10 January 2022 at 7.00 pm

Committee Room B-06, Lambeth Town Hall, London SW2 1RW

**Members Present:** Councillor Liz Atkins (Chair), Councillor Mary Atkins (Vice-Chair), Councillor Jonathan Bartley, Councillor Joshua Lindsey (Vice-Chair), Councillor Marianna Masters (Vice-Chair), Councillor Joanna Reynolds (Substitute), Councillor Irfan Mohammed and Councillor Martin Tiedemann

**Apologies:** Councillor Stephen Donnelly

**Also present online:** Councillor Tim Briggs

### 1 Declaration of Pecuniary Interests

Councillor Marianna Masters declared that she was a Governor at Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Trust and had previously seen the report on Minnie Kidd House. However, this did not amount to a pecuniary interest and she would sit on the Committee during this item.

### 2 Minutes of Previous Meeting

**RESOLVED:** That the minutes of the meeting held on 12 October 2021 be approved as a correct record of proceedings.

### 3 Minnie Kidd House: background of closure and future use of the asset

The Chair, Councillor Liz Atkins, introduced the item, explaining that this was an update requested at the meeting on 14 July 2021. As the report was for information, officers were not in attendance to respond to Members' questions, but these would be provided to officers for response outside the meeting.

Committee Members raised the following issues and questions to be referred to officers outside the meeting:

- Members requested the report, or an extract, from the external review referred to in Appendix 1.
- There were discrepancies on the affected residents, such as the third resident who had not moved by December 2020 who was not referred to in Appendix 1.
- Members had been informed that a decision on the site would be made in spring 2021, but the building was still empty, and requested that other uses, such as accommodation for NHS staff, be considered.
- Consultation with the local community on the future of the site was essential, and

residents would like the site to continue to be used for health purposes.

- Members requested that the Council and GSTT apologise to affected families.
- Members requested that more information on the legal basis on the oversight of the plans for Minnie Kidd House.
- More consideration and scrutiny on the decision-making process was needed, particularly given the issues that were made earlier in the process.

**RESOLVED:**

1. That the report be noted.
2. That the above issues and questions be sent to officers for response outside of the meeting.

#### **4 Medium Term Financial Strategy**

*Councillor Lindsey joined the meeting at 7.15.*

Councillor Andy Wilson, Cabinet Member for Finance and Performance, introduced the report to the Committee:

- The report had been presented to Cabinet in December, and since then, the Provisional Local Government Settlement had been received, which gave greater certainty on future funding.
- Inflation was a considerable issue across the economy and would have an impact on the Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy.
- Covid-19, particularly the wave arising from the Omicron variant, would have an impact on economic and population growth in the borough, and would potentially impact the Council's ability to fund its services.

The Committee then heard from witnesses.

Nighat Khan, Managing Director of New Vision for Women, a Community Interest Company, addressed the Committee, stating that:

- Her organisation provided workshops and training on confidence, wellbeing and employability in the local community, and particularly focussed on Black, Asian and Multi-Ethnic (BAME) women.
- She had found it difficult to secure funding from the Council. In seven years of operation, her organisation had secured Council funding once. Vulnerable communities, such as those her organisation supported, needed more assistance in accessing and applying for Council funding.
- The Council should be more open in the types of funding available and should help smaller organisations to access it.

Peter Roberts, GMB, then stated that:

- GMB requested that when outsourcing was being discussed, that existing staff and their circumstances be considered and that conditions be transferred with any staff.
- There were many GMB members at the Council, and as a result, GMB had a strong relationship with many Councillors.
- Consultations should involve staff and trades unions as early as possible.

The following information was provided to the Committee by officers and the Cabinet Member:

- The opportunity to review commissioning and purchasing decisions was available

to Members, from raising questions to officers to calling-in decisions to Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

- Inflation would affect issues such as contract values, and the value of funding allocated in previous years. The inflation rate used for budget setting was increased as part of the Medium Term Financial Strategy.
- Paragraph 2.53 established the reasons for increasing reserve levels. Some funding from central government, such as business rates relief, was paid in advance of need, and this had been set aside as reserves. Some Covid-19 funding was only provided for the first quarter of 2021/22, and the Council had decided to reserve some of this funding for later in the year. This reserved funding had been valuable when the latest wave of infections started in late 2021.
- The Council had a 10% reserve target, and reserves of £34m would meet that.
- Fees and charges normally increased in line with inflation, and were broadly in line with other inner London boroughs. Many of the opportunities for further income generation were around commercial opportunities such as advertising.
- The Council had a Promotions and Advertising Policy, and was working with Adblock to ensure the policy adequately protected the Council's aims and values.
- The HRA overspend was concerning. One reason for the overspend was that contractors were unable to visit properties for repairs during lockdowns, and as a result the conditions worsened, necessitating more works, at greater expense. The Council had received no additional funding for the HRA to manage Covid-19-related pressures, and the overspend was having to be met through the HRA reserves.
- Income from parking regularly exceeded targets. Some of the increase related to fines arising from Low Traffic Neighbourhood contraventions, but officers did not have the breakdown of LTN fines and standard parking income at the meeting.
- The capital borrowing figure was primarily used for borrowing related to the Redress Scheme and the Capital Programme and was not solely for Homes for Lambeth.
- Although the cost of borrowing from the PWLB was low, the overall strategy was to reduce borrowing, and the use other sources of funding such as Section 106 and Community Infrastructure Levy was preferred. The council had not refinanced loans despite the low interest rates available because the premium cost of redemption was too high to make this value for money.
- No new savings had to be identified, and £1 million of savings had been removed as they were not achievable. Details of these savings could be provided to the Committee outside of the meeting.
- The overspend in Resident Services mainly related to Housing, a large part of which was due to the increased number of households in temporary accommodation as a result of the pandemic. Additional spending on cybersecurity following the cyberattack on LB Hackney.
- The risk of HfL being unable to repay loans to the Council was judged to be low as loan repayments related directly to the sale and rent of properties.

Members requested that the Council consult with the Mayor of London's office on advertising policy to ensure that the policies and aims aligned.

**RESOLVED:**

1. To ensure that communications on available Council funding and how to access this funding be made available, particularly to small organisations supporting vulnerable groups.
2. To provide the Committee information on commissioning small organisations and the third sector, including on the role of Integrate and an equalities analysis of the

- organisations commissioned.
3. That the Council be mindful of retaining and supporting staff, and to consult and fully inform them of proposed changes in the Council.
  4. To provide the Committee with a breakdown on the sources of parking income.
  5. That the delivery of social returns in relation to fees and charges be prioritised, be assessed annually, and that outcomes be monitored.
  6. To consult with the Mayor of London to ensure local and London-wide advertising policies align.
  7. That the Committee welcome the absence of new savings targets, but that the Committee be provided with a six-monthly update on progress on previously agreed savings and the impact on residents.
  8. To update both Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Housing Scrutiny Sub-Committee on a quarterly basis on performance of HRA contractors on repairs and voids, to include details of any penalties issued.

## **5 Benefits and Welfare Support**

The report was introduced by Councillor Andy Wilson, Cabinet Member for Finance and Performance:

- There had been increased demand for benefits as a result of Covid-19. Third sector organisations, such as Citizens' Advice Merton and Lambeth (CAML), provided support to residents, and the Council commissioned London Councils for employment and benefit advice.
- The Council Tax Support Scheme was being made more generous in order to support a greater number of residents.

The Committee then heard from witnesses:

Helen Hayes MP, Member of Parliament for Dulwich and West Norwood, addressed the Committee:

- Each year she received hundreds of cases relating to benefits, and there had been an increased number of people needing benefits since the start of the pandemic.
- The benefits system was difficult to understand, and people's existing vulnerabilities often created a further barrier to accessing and understanding the system. As a result, advice centres such as Centre 70 and Brixton Advice Centre, were invaluable.
- Delays and administrative errors tended to originate from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), rather than the Council. Delays and errors had devastating consequences on her constituents.
- Support for childcare within Universal Credit was particularly difficult due to it being paid in arrears, resulting in regular overpayments and underpayments.
- People often struggled to access disability benefits due to the system of assessments.

Susanne Hudson, CAML, then provided the following information to the Committee:

- There had always been high numbers of people in Lambeth accessing benefits, but this had increased since the start of the pandemic.
- The closure of a number of advice centres in recent years had left more people reliant on a small number of advice providers, which caused significant pressure on advice centres.
- CAML had a strong relationship with the Council, and Council departments were generally good at referring residents to CAML and other services.
- There was a growing demand for support, particularly from groups that had

previously not received benefits. Families that had previously been able to balance their budgets were unable to due to the impact of Covid-19 on employment and inflation.

- CAML had undertaken research a year earlier and had found that there would be long-term economic impact, which was still being felt.

*During discussion of this item, the guillotine fell at 9.00pm.*

**RESOLVED:** *That the meeting continue for a further period of up to 30 minutes.*

Witnesses, officers and the Cabinet Member then provided the following information in response to questions from Members:

- Councillors, MPs and advice centres would likely only see a small proportion of cases of people needing assistance with the benefits system. There were concerns that some people accessed poor or unscrupulous advice, particularly in harder to reach communities. People who were reluctant to engage with Councillors or MPs tended to be more open to approach voluntary sector organisations, particularly those that already had strong community links.
- Advice centres were conscious of the wide variety of languages spoken in the borough and made efforts to ensure their services were as accessible as possible. Over 30 languages were spoken by staff at CAML, and staff had access to Language Line for other languages.
- The Council had worked with CAML on outreach, particularly for underserved communities.
- Translation and interpretation at Council buildings had not been considered in the report's remit, but concerns could be passed on to the Customer Service department.
- Funding had been made available through credit unions for people facing financial hardship due to benefits errors.
- The Council was in regular contact with DWP on issues such as errors, delays and the childcare component.
- Officers had previously worked with groups of residents to ensure letters on Council Tax and benefits were accessible, although some wording was set in law. The webpage was being reviewed to ensure it was as accessible as possible.

*Councillor Bartley left the meeting at 9.00pm.*

The following was provided in response to questions from Members:

- Following the closure of the Lambeth Law Centre, CAML applied for charitable funding to provide immigration support in Lambeth and Merton for two years. The number of people without recourse to public funds accessing this support could be provided outside the meeting.
- Different services provided different opportunities for residents to give feedback. Income Max asked for feedback in all cases, while newer providers had more limited options for feedback. When services were being commissioned, focus groups were used to provide detailed feedback.
- The value of local organisations, and of the relationship between the Council and organisations was significant, and these organisations should continue to be supported by the Council.
- Referrals would be made in the same way under the new platform as the current system, and 55% of tenants had signed up to the platform. Before the pandemic, demand for face-to-face appointments had been low, even during a time of increasing demand for the service overall.

**RESOLVED:**

1. That the Council recognise the need for additional community help for recent migrants, including access to interpretation and translation
2. To explore further methods of improving the Council's relationship with DWP.
3. To further improve and revise communications with residents and to trial with users within six months.
4. To acknowledge the value of the Council's relationships with external organisations such as Centre 70 and CAML, and the work of external organisations, and calls for their continued support.
5. To provide additional opportunities for residents to provide feedback on the service they receive, and to report on this annually.
6. That officers provide the Committee with the Advice Service Review report.
7. To provide specific benefits advice for people on zero hours contracts.
8. That the Committee welcomes the extension of the Council Tax Support scheme which will support residents in need of financial help.
9. To analyse the number of people without recourse to public funds approaching the Council.

## **6 Work Programme**

Committee Members suggested the following areas for potential future scrutiny:

- Road Safety Strategy
- Thames Water
- Waste Strategy contract performance
- Health inequalities
- Economic resilience post-pandemic

**RESOLVED:** That, subject to the comments above, the work programme and the status of actions (Appendix 1) be noted.

The meeting ended at 9.25 pm

CHAIR  
OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE  
Wednesday 2 February 2022

Date of Despatch: Tuesday 25 January 2022

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