



Education and Local Economy Scrutiny Commission

MINUTES of the OPEN section of the Education and Local Economy Scrutiny Commission held on Thursday 26 February 2026 at 7.00 pm at Ground Floor Meeting Room G02A - 160 Tooley Street, London SE1 2QH

PRESENT: Councillor Cassandra Brown (Chair)
Councillor Rachel Bentley
Councillor Margy Newens
Councillor Youcef Hassaine
Martin Brecknell (Co-opted Member)
Alie Kallon (Co-opted Member)
Mannah Kargbo (Co-opted Member)

OTHER MEMBERS PRESENT: Councillor John Batteson

OFFICER SUPPORT: Amit Alva, Scrutiny Officer

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Irina Von Wiese and Co-opted Member Claire Williams.

Apologies for lateness were received from Councillor Margy Newens.

2. NOTIFICATION OF ANY ITEMS OF BUSINESS WHICH THE CHAIR DEEMS URGENT

There were no items of business which the Chair deemed urgent.

3. DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS AND DISPENSATIONS

There were no disclosures of interest or dispensations.

4. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 5 February 2026 were approved as a correct record.

5. CABINET MEMBER INTERVIEW - CABINET MEMBER FOR CLIMATE EMERGENCY, JOBS AND BUSINESS

The Chair invited Councillor John Batteson, Cabinet Member for Climate Emergency, Jobs and Transport (change in portfolio title as of 25 February 2026 Council Assembly, prior to agenda summons publication); supported by Danny Edwards (Assistant Director of Economy) and Mark Grant (Assistant Director of Property) to give an overview of the portfolio across the year.

On local economy and routes into employment, the Cabinet Member noted that:

- the Council Delivery Plan is committed to supporting 2,500 residents from priority cohorts into work, 2,900 had gained work, primarily through Southwark Works
- residents in these priority cohorts faced the highest barriers and achieving progress in this area was therefore extremely important for raising prosperity and addressing inequalities
- Southwark Works had been active for 21 years, supporting, on average, 400 people into work with a second hub opening 3-4 weeks ago, in Peckham
- the new hub was made possible through central government funding and was directed at supporting residents with complex health barriers and disabilities via individual, tailored job support
- the Youth Trailblazer's support for care leavers trialled new practices to increase employment outcomes for care leavers – initially funded for one year, that had been extended
- the progress made on Youth Trailblazers had been shared with the Corporate Parenting Committee given their keen interest in care leavers' employment
- a new Skills Delivery Plan was being adopted with aims adjusted to reflect where more work was needed and where success had already been made
- by Q3, the number of new apprenticeships supported was greater than the full year target
- the nature of apprenticeships had shifted – there were more higher-level apprenticeships than lower level – and in the future it would help to report more closely on the latter so that routes into employment were not cut off for those without higher level qualifications or training
- regarding paid internships for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, targets here had also been exceeded

On business development and the Town Centre Action Plans, he noted:

- the aims of the Southwark Pioneers Fund had been met – supporting underrepresented groups to start and develop businesses – and new funding was being sought as previously this had come from the UK Shared Prosperity Fund and no more funding would be provided
- that funding was not the only issue, however, with local businesses also asking for skills opportunities, something that the Supplier Readiness Programme had helped with, in particular regarding developing their preparedness to bid for contracts in the Council and elsewhere
- a focus on procurement could also help by redesigning larger contracts, where appropriate, so that smaller businesses could participate in bidding for parts of them
- the Town Centre Action Plans had been well received as a way of keeping local businesses and residents informed of immediate and longer-term actions in their area

On the Living Wage, he noted that:

- the Council's ambition to double the number of accredited Living Wage employers from 298 in 2022 had been challenging although over 450 employers had now been accredited
- the challenge resulted from a slowdown in employers becoming accredited as this required them to pay a fee to the Living Wage Foundation
- Living Wage Foundation-reporting showed that 7,000 employees received a pay rise as a result of employers becoming accredited and paying the Living Wage
- the work reflected strong partnership efforts across employers and the Living Wage Action Group, showing that progress required collaboration beyond the council alone
- effective advocacy remained essential to encourage more employers to adopt and champion the Living Wage

In terms of commercial property, Councillor Batteson reported that:

- Council-owned properties on high streets sometimes included both the shop-level commercial unit and residential properties (above a shop parade, for example)
- such properties generated revenue and also allowed the Council some control over the kind of business or organisation taking tenancy and, through this, an additional means for it to contribute to shaping town centres and high streets
- an important consideration was how the Council might use some commercial properties to provide affordable workspace and to support the voluntary and community sector (VCS)
- repairs were a priority and it was recognised that where residential properties were located above commercial premises, additional challenges

existed e.g. in terms of access although these were managed in the same way as purely residential repairs and communications with the Housing Department indicated awareness of repairs' potential effects on businesses

The Chair then invited questions from the Commission. These included:

- whether – given some employers' efforts to increase in-office working – promoting affordable workspace remained an efficient use of resources and whether an evaluation of need had been conducted
- if a specific work experience programme for children with SEND had been explored
- what progress had been made on commercial property portfolio issues such as arrears and rent negotiations
- how the Council was encouraging employers to employ young people with SEND
- what overlap existed between apprenticeships, green jobs and construction skills
- when looking back over the administration, what the Cabinet Member was most proud of in terms of achievements, what the biggest challenge had been and what they would have done differently
- why there was a shift to more higher level apprenticeships
- why the UK Shared Prosperity Fund had finished
- how the Living Wage might be strengthened including through the procurement framework and contractors
- what a blue-sky solution might be for the challenge around commercial repairs due to water ingress from Council residential properties (given a pressured HRA)
- whether accessing support from Southwark Works required a referral
- the differences between placements and apprenticeships
- the means the Council had for checking that contractors paid the London Living Wage to their employees for delivery of contracts with the Council (as they were bound to, given the Council's status as an accredited Living Wage Employer)

Councillor Batteson, supported where appropriate by Danny and Mark (the relevant officers), responded that:

- the affordable workplace strategy was adopted last year – this included the facility for developments to provide payments to the Council in lieu of building commercial space so enabling the Council to create workspace hubs and have a greater say in who qualifies for these spaces, and where they are located – a recommendation from the land commission
- a pilot workspace hub in Peckham was in development
- more work on evaluating need should be carried out
- mapping of affordable workspace was being undertaken so that businesses and individuals could be informed easily of the opportunities available
- colleagues from a range of departments worked to make sure pathways

connected so that children with SEND had real opportunities in terms of work experience

- Southwark Works' biggest contract was to support vulnerable young people, including young people with SEND and others, into employment
- repairs due to water ingress, for example, in Council-owned residential properties were linked to the responsibilities for commercial spaces through the need to compensate businesses when they suffered water damage or had their activities curtailed
- the cost of repair work was significant as it often involved major works rather than 'patching up' a single issue
- commercial rental income had grown from £18million (pre-Covid) to £25.5million and was growing
- debt had also increased due to invoices for rent showing immediately as debt – as rent revenue had increased so, inevitably, had this component of debt
- historic bad debt had not been written off so this made current debt seem larger than it might otherwise
- the income from commercial rent was important but large increases which could threaten the long-term sustainability of businesses were not desirable
- extra resources in the legal and property teams would help to increase the pace of processing
- tenants did not always have representation when in dispute with the Council and this could slow down negotiations
- the Council itself could lead on inclusive recruitment as well as, externally, in identifying employers already recruiting and supporting the development of young people with SEND
- this work was especially challenging when the general environment for young people seeking employment was difficult
- with Southwark Works, for example, ongoing support for young people was built into the model – Connect to Work also provided similar support
- resource and capacity were currently a key limiting factor
- the Council had engaged larger employers who might have more capacity for supporting additional needs and had been asking them what they needed in terms of making it easier to create opportunities for younger people
- apprenticeships, green jobs and construction skills and the opportunities for connecting them were highly integrated
- the Council used the Central London Forward definition of a green job i.e. one that contributed to net zero
- ensuring news about Southwark Works' programmes and the people it was charged with supporting would, by its nature, remain a challenge in spite of the success it had had
- regarding apprenticeships, it was likely the levy had encouraged organisations to focus on higher level apprenticeships rather than apprenticeships as an entry level route into careers and professions
- better reporting of apprenticeships across levels would allow greater comparability against other London boroughs and nationally, therefore

helping with understanding how the Council might use additional levers to shape how apprenticeships are created and used

- the Pride in Place Programme had replaced the UK Shared Prosperity Fund but the Council was not due to get any funds from this
- regarding the Living Wage, the important point was that employees were paid it rather than whether their employer was accredited
- notwithstanding the above, discussions were due to take place with the Living Wage Foundation about how the accreditation costs for employers might be kept down
- there was a requirement that all businesses taking on commercial leases, whether new lettings or renewals, must pay staff the London Living Wage
- in terms of managing commercial repairs, work had already focused on tightening communications between commercial property and relevant housing teams so that issues raised could be dealt with as quickly as possible and that commercial repairs were treated with the correct priority
- commercial properties were included in the Stock Condition Survey and this was revealing the works needed whilst allowing these to be planned and budgeted for (i.e. rather than being dealt with reactively)
- Southwark Works was open – referrals were not necessary although if convenient, appointments could be made
- while placements or internships generally lasted a matter of months, apprenticeships were longer-term and provided structured learning opportunities alongside work
- officers who procure and officers who managed contracts were responsible for monitoring the implementation of a contract's stipulation regarding contracted employees being paid the London Living Wage – in practice, however, the assurance of contracted companies was taken in good faith

The Chair thanked the Cabinet Member, Councillor John Batteson, and officers Danny Edwards and Mark Grant.

6. DRAFT SCRUTINY RECOMMENDATIONS - EDUCATION AND LOCAL ECONOMY SCRUTINY COMMISSION

The Chair introduced the item by taking the Draft Scrutiny Recommendations report as read and inviting feedback and additional comments.

The Commission drafted and agreed additional recommendations (to be fine-tuned after the meeting). The final report would therefore include recommendations from the draft report and the following recommendations, summarised as follows, that Cabinet:

- review whether the London Living Wage is being paid to contracted employees delivering contracts for the Council
- promote the activities of Southwark Works and Connect to Work more widely
- promote the pilot hub for working space in Peckham as well as similar

spaces across the borough

- report on numbers of apprenticeships by level
- define milestones for organisations supporting work experience so that their objectives align and, more particularly, to encourage businesses' developing employment opportunities for younger people with SEND

7. WORK PROGRAMME 2025-26

The Chair noted the Commission's activities over the year and thanked members for their contributions.

Meeting ended at 9:41 pm

CHAIR:

DATED: