

Overview & Scrutiny Committee

MINUTES of the OPEN section of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee held on Tuesday 9 February 2021 at 6.30 pm (Online / virtual meeting).

PRESENT: Councillor Ian Wingfield (Chair)
Councillor Victor Chamberlain
Councillor Humaira Ali
Councillor Peter Babudu
Councillor Jack Buck
Councillor Gavin Edwards
Councillor Sarah King
Councillor Jason Ochere
Councillor Victoria Olisa
Councillor Jane Salmon
Councillor Leanne Werner
Martin Brecknell (Co-opted Member)

OTHER MEMBERS PRESENT: Councillor Rebecca Lury, Cabinet Member for Finance and Resources

OFFICER SUPPORT: Everton Roberts, Head of Overview and Scrutiny (Acting)
Norman Coombe, Head of Corporate Team, Legal Services

1. APOLOGIES

There were no apologies for absence.

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

There were no late items.

3. DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS AND DISPENSATIONS

There were no disclosures of interests or dispensations.

4. MINUTES

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meetings held on 9 November 2020, 12, 25 and 26 January 2021 be approved as correct records.

5. ANNUAL WORKFORCE REPORT 2019-20 [CABINET REPORT]

The committee received a presentation from Councillor Rebecca Lury, Cabinet Member for Finance and Resources on the annual workforce report 2019-20, considered by Cabinet on 8 December 2020. The committee also heard from Melanie Medley, Head of Human Resources, Kate Enver, Strategic Leader, HR Policy and Projects, Kamran Khan, Head of Organisation Transformation.

Councillor Lury presented the report and informed the committee that the report which had been considered by cabinet in December 2020 only covered the period up to April 2020, as such didn't cover the impact of the pandemic which would be covered in the next annual report.

Councillor Lury highlighted the following key points:

There was a gender pay gap of minus 6.6% which was a reduction from the previous year – male employees had been paid slightly less than female employees. This was predominately due to the larger number of workers in lower paid roles across waste and cleansing services. This was considered a positive picture as there was not a significant gender pay gap.

In terms of disability – there had been an increase in individuals declaring that they have a disability. The council was now at the same average across all the London boroughs, which was at 6.2%.

In relation to ethnicity – there was a need to focus on grades 14 and above in terms of senior positions held by BAME staff. Representation was increasing slowly and was to be a key area of focus for the coming year.

There was a strong LGBTQ+ staff network which really helped to promote and raise awareness of the work the council was doing in this area.

Pregnancy and Maternity – there was no staff take up of shared parental leave in the last financial year, it was felt that this showed a wider resistance still in take up generally across the country in terms of that policy. It was highlighted later on in the meeting discussion that there had been take up of shared parental leave this

year. There had been a high rate of women coming back to work, this was something the council could be proud of in terms of flexible working and doing what it can for women who want to come back to work.

Training – There was a significant number of apprentices and trainees across the council, with a good range of people at all ages who are taking up the opportunity to retrain.

Officers updated the committee on issues that had not been directly covered in the annual report and answered questions of committee members.

Reference was made by officers to the Southwark Stands Together work stream which had been set up to address inequalities across the organisation. Significant work in this area had been undertaken since the summer – information on this would be included in future reports.

The HR function had realigned itself to focus towards the work around Southwark Stands Together. There were new refreshed governance arrangements overseen by the chief officer team, seven working groups operating under that work stream, listening circles, and a wellbeing survey. Key issues identified for black workers were around career progression and recruitment practices.

In terms of career progression, the learning and development team had worked on launching the coaching and mentoring scheme, including reverse mentoring. There were also live applications for 'Black on Boards' which was a development scheme across a number of London boroughs. A career development portal had also been launched 18 months ago.

The council would be celebrating Trans Week at the end of March with the launch of the transgender gender identity guidance for staff. This would come with a whole programme of support, training, and learning and development.

In response to a question around sickness absence reporting in relation to stress, anxiety and mental health issues, it was explained that there had been a range of initiatives undertaken including the signing of the 'Time to Change Pledge' for Southwark Council. This gave the opportunity to reassure and support staff across the organisation and to actively encourage staff within the workforce to discuss mental health issues and to come forward. The council also looked at changing the sickness absence categorisation to bring them in alignment with the National guidance and those of London councils and doing away with not having to explain why a member of staff had been off sick. The combination of active promotion around mental health, mental health first aider training, and embedding them within teams, along with the change in sickness absence reporting, meant that where absence had been due to stress or anxiety, staff disclosed it, which in turn meant that the council was able to offer support through occupational health to managers and staff. The council also supported the national campaign for Able Futures which was a government initiative to support mental health.

A question was asked around the use of positive action. It was explained that the council was looking at positive action and how it could be used. It was also reported that an external consultant had been appointed to work with staff to enable them to speak freely and openly about their experiences.

In relation to a question around the council's approach in ensuring that the very top of the organisation reflected the community at large, specifically from a racial perspective - it was acknowledged that there was very low visibility at grade 14 and above, and this was an area of focus.

In response to a question around the monitoring of the workload of staff in light of increased insourcing, staff cuts and impact of the pandemic, the cabinet member for finance and resources advised that she was very conscious of the workload of staff especially during the pandemic. It was acknowledged that a lot of staff hadn't been able to take annual leave or had to work extended hours to enable the council to be in a position to tackle the pandemic. The need for prioritising what the council was doing, especially at this moment had been raised by the trade unions and this was something that was taken away as a cabinet. This was one of the reasons for the refreshed council plan commitments following a review of what could be realistically delivered. Conversations were ongoing around areas of priority.

In relation to addressing BAME staffing issues it was felt that there needed to be some clear statistics and targets to work with. Concern was also raised around the rates of disciplinary that led to dismissal of BAME staff compared to white employees.

Information was requested for a later date in terms of panel make up of unsuccessful BAME applicants at interview stage for senior level jobs and also the type of recruitment firms that the council engages with, and their success rate in recruiting a diverse pool of people.

It was also requested that the information arising from the work of the consultant working with staff be shared with the committee.

A question was asked around monitoring staff based at remote sites and whether they were reporting any discrimination. It was explained that a lot of work had been undertaken over the last year to reach out to these staff and provide the support that they need. This was being actively monitored with the assistance of the trade unions and feedback enabled the targeting of areas to improve the experience of staff.

A further question was asked regarding the measures in place to reduce stress, depression and anxiety in the work force in light of 9% increase from 2018 to 2019. It was explained that changes in reporting options had seen an increase in numbers and an understanding of why people were off sick. A range of low, medium and high provisions were being put in place to support people. This information was on the council's internal intranet. There were also health and

wellbeing conversations taking place with all staff via their managers. A huge amount of support was being received from the public health team on the development of the council's local mental health first aiders with over 30 mental health first aiders trained and providing support across all sites within the organisation. There was also an employee assistance programme which staff could ring at any time if they felt they needed support. A trained professional could signpost them to relevant support, including free sessions of individual counselling and support without the requirement to go through their line manager. There had also been the heavy promotion of the Able Futures offer which provides a range of support until a person accesses critical services within the NHS. There was also a range of people trained to support people, if they are in a more acute position with their mental health so that they can be directed to the right services.

In terms of prevention, it was hoped that through the health and wellbeing conversations that the source of the issue, be it totally work related or a combination of home and work or solely home could be identified and the support targeted. There was also a microsite available that staff without access to a computer or the council's intranet, could access from their mobile phone. The health and wellbeing conversation and dialogue between the member of staff and their line manager in the first instance will help prevent or mitigate some of the pressures and stresses that the member of staff might be feeling.

A question was asked around career progression, how it was monitored and assessed. It was explained that the career progression framework had been launched as part of the performance management framework, within that managers were being advised to have that career conversation. It was however not something that was currently being measured in the performance management framework.

RESOLVED:

That the Annual Workforce Report 2019-20 be noted.

6. SCRUTINY REVIEW - REGENERATION (COMMUNITY REPRESENTATIVES)

The committee heard from Ms Eileen Conn on behalf of Peckham Vision in respect of Regeneration in the borough.

Ms Conn addressed the committee on the need for regeneration led by re-use, the need to build houses in the borough, the need to transform the relationship between the council and community groups in relation to regeneration and redevelopment.

In relation to the need for regeneration to be led by re-use, Ms Conn cited a number of council plans over the last 15 years for Peckham town centre which all involved the complete demolition and redevelopment of the sites. She also felt that there had been ineffective community engagement, with the community having to campaign against these policies. In each case the community campaigns

succeeding in reversing the policies.

Ms Conn considered that the lesson from this was that all development must start with an audit of the facts before any redevelopment plans are begun and verified with local stakeholders.

Ms Conn explained that across London, the demolition-led redevelopment approach to regeneration was the norm in the industry. Ms Conn stressed that carbon emissions from demolition and new construction were a significant contributor to the climate emergency. A preference for re-use was essential for consistency with the climate emergency policies.

Ms Conn explained that the new Development Charter now required a fact-based audit of existing assets and uses for any planning application for redevelopment, but that there was no guidance for its production or role in the planning process. Ms Conn advised that it needed to be used as a strong benchmark to ensure that the regeneration provided significant net benefits to the existing community.

With regard to building housing, Ms Conn expressed that the housing crisis in London was due to a lack of housing that most people can afford. Ms Conn stressed that planning policy of a minimum of 35% affordable in respect of new developments was failing to meet the need for housing – 35% seemed to usually become the maximum, and ‘affordability’ which can mean up to 80% of market rent was outside the means of most people. As a result, it meant that a minimum of 65% of new developments given planning permission were unaffordable. Ms Conn presented household income figures that supported this.

Ms Conn acknowledged the move to increase the minimum affordable housing threshold to 50% but as the vast majority of households could not afford market rates for sale or rent, it was still unsustainable and unviable to give permission for 50% which was still unaffordable. Ms Conn felt that the upper limit of housing which fell into this criteria should be 10-20%.

Ms Conn asked the committee to consider the following council actions which she felt would help to shift current thinking:

Bringing together and publicising annually:

- The income levels of the population in the borough
- The range of sale prices and rent levels across the borough, and
- A simple table showing the discrepancy between these.

Joining with community groups and others to inform, educate and engage the public about the inadequacies of the demolition-led redevelopment approach, and the search for alternative solutions.

Ms Conn highlighted that there were local people across the borough who take up local issues as they arise and develop links with each other and form important local networks. Ms Conn advised that in many cases these networks have a longevity and continuity of local knowledge which could be very valuable for planning and regeneration and stressed the need to develop ways to enable these networks to be accessible to policy makers. Ms Conn indicated that a key area here was the working relationship between the local ward activists and their ward councillors and the development of local ward networks bringing together those who take an interest in planning and regeneration and related matters.

The committee asked questions of Ms Conn, following her presentation. Questions and discussion were held around the following:

- Poor consultation processes and engagement with the community – Ms Conn felt that part of the problem was that the council kept wanting to improve existing consultation processes, where actually what was needed was a different approach. Ms Conn indicated that people were being engaged with too late, particularly in relation to big development schemes, but also small domestic schemes. Ms Conn felt that what was needed was a different way of understanding how people who live, work and run businesses in areas, and who are an integral to the fabric of the place can be helped to engage at the right moment with the people who want to do something with their property.
- The plans and planning guidance the council was required to operate in and deliver against.
- Delivery of affordable housing.
- Difficulty for the public in understanding and interpreting regeneration policy due to its complexity.
- The challenge for councillors working with genuine local community activists, and those activists representing their own self-interests, and the need to work with the whole community.
- Government white paper and the reform of S106 contributions.

The chair thanked Ms Conn for her attendance.

7. SCRUTINY REVIEW - REGENERATION (DEVELOPER AND TRANSPORT REPRESENTATIVES)

There were no developers or transport representatives present at this meeting.

8. WORK PROGRAMME 2020-21

Questions were asked around low traffic neighbourhoods. It was suggested that the cabinet member, for leisure, environment and roads be invited to a future

meeting.

RESOLVED:

That the work programme as at 9 February 2021 be noted.

9. REPLACEMENT OF VICE-CHAIR - HOUSING AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT SCRUTINY COMMISSION

RESOLVED:

That Councillor Damian O'Brien replace Councillor Hamish McCallum as vice-chair on the Housing and Community Engagement Scrutiny Commission.

The meeting ended at 8.22pm

CHAIR:

DATED: