

MINUTES OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Tuesday, 21 February 2023 at 7.00 pm

PRESENT: Councillors Mark Ingleby (Chair), Ese Erheriene (Vice-Chair), Yemisi Anifowose, Chris Best, Natasha Burgess, Will Cooper, Laura Cunningham, Sian Eiles, Billy Harding, Stephen Hayes, Mark Jackson, Liz Johnston-Franklin, Ayesha Lahai-Taylor, Jack Lavery, Aisha Malik-Smith, Joan Millbank, Hilary Moore, John Muldoon, Rachel Onikosi, Rosie Parry, Stephen Penfold, James Rathbone, Rudi Schmidt, Aliya Sheikh, Luke Warner and Carol Webley-Brown

APOLOGIES: Councillors Eva Kestner, James Royston, Luke Sorba and Susan Wise

ALSO PRESENT: Charlotte Dale (Head of Scrutiny and Policy), Natacha Israel (Local and Regional Government Liaison Lead) (Thames Water), Carl Leadbetter (Head of South Region Wastewater) (Thames Water), Dr Catherine Mbema (Director of Public Health) (London Borough of Lewisham), Simon Moore (Head of London Planning) (Thames Water) and Martin Padley (London Water Director) (Thames Water)

1. Minutes of the meeting held on 21 September 2022

- 1.1 **RESOLVED:** That the minutes of the meeting held on 21 September 2022 be agreed as an accurate record of proceedings, subject to the inclusion of Councillor Moore's apologies.

2. Declaration of Interests

- 2.1 **RESOLVED:** That the following non-prejudicial declaration of interest be noted:
- Councillor Onikosi is a non-executive director of the Consumer Council for Water, an independent body representing water consumers in England and Wales.

3. Cost of Living programme - Update

- 3.1 Catherine Mbema spoke to the Committee about the Council's cost of living programme, providing updates on the Food Justice Action Plan and Food Justice Alliance; the provision of energy advice including signposting to the GLA Warmer Homes Grant; maximising residents' income streams via housing benefit, pension credits and the council tax reduction scheme; the debt triage service; and the warm welcomes programme.
- 3.2 Councillors Best, Warner and Lahai-Taylor provided updates on the scrutiny carried out by the Healthier Communities, Children & Young People and Safer, Stronger Communities Select Committees respectively.

- Members of the Healthier Communities Select Committee felt that the warm welcomes scheme in libraries had been varied in its success, but there had been some very good activities on offer. The “welcome” element of the scheme was clearly very important to residents.
- The Children and Young People Select Committee had considered reports on the cost of living crisis; heard from invited guests; and gone on relevant visits. Some of the testimony they had heard had been very moving, and in some cases harrowing. Many parents and children were suffering considerably and were living in poverty, and radical action was clearly needed to address this scandal.
- The Safer, Stronger Communities Select Committee had looked at the crisis from an equalities perspective and had considered work to map the activities taking place across the Local Strategic Partnership to support Lewisham’s diverse residents in these difficult times.

3.3 In response to questions from the Committee, the following key points were noted:

- The assessment process for VCS organisations to apply for grant funding to run activities to support residents should not be too onerous, in order that smaller grass roots organisations who were well placed to provide high impact interventions were not disadvantaged. The process should be transparent and easy to access, but there would need to be some criteria to ensure the funding was used effectively. Officers would look into how smaller groups could receive assistance with completing applications.
- Officers were using an equalities screening tool to ensure help was being targeted at those most in need of support. The evaluation process would also take equalities into account.
- It was likely that there would be further scrutiny of the cost of living programme by the Committee in the new municipal year.

3.4 **RESOLVED:** That the updates provided be noted.

4. **Thames Water**

4.1 The Chair introduced the item and welcomed the guests from Thames Water to the meeting: Martin Padley, London Water Director; Simon Moore; Head of London Planning; Carl Leadbetter - Head of South Region Wastewater; and Natacha Israel - Local and Regional Government Liaison Lead.

4.2 It was agreed that the two Cabinet Members present, Councillors Bell and Krupski, could ask questions with the consent of the Committee.

4.3 A comprehensive presentation was provided by Thames Water, a copy of which has been included with the agenda papers. Thames Water accepted that performance needed to improve and activity to achieve this included:

- Increasing the number of repair teams to 192
- Improving communication with customers and partners

- Instituting a new emergency response process
- Replacing 26% of water mains since 2000 based on condition (it was noted that age was not only factor in whether a mains failed, soil condition amongst other things also influenced the rate of degradation)
- Proactively checking valves at least every 5 years.

4.4 The following key points were noted in response to questions from Members:

- Whilst Thames Water was looking to recruit more engineers, it was a competitive market and the company was finding it difficult to attract applicants despite generous rates of pay (it was noted that Thames Water paid slightly above the market rate).
- The vast majority of residents who had a smart meter fitted saw a reduction in their bills. However, customers were allowed to go back to unmetered bills after one year if they wished to.
- Ensuring the right level of water pressure in the water system was complex. If set too high, the likelihood of bursts increased, too low and there were customer complaints, as showers etc were ineffective. It was noted that high rise properties could be fitted with boosters if water pressure was an issue.
- Although Thames Water had made significant profits recently, Martin Padley reported that Thames Water tended to oscillate between large profits and large losses as it was funded through debt; it held bonds with insurers to manage inflationary pressures; and its actual position this year was a cash loss of £1m. Any money it did make was reinvested and its shareholders (mainly pension funds) had not taken dividends for the last 6 years.
- It was accepted that performance needed to improve and Thames Water was held to account by the regulator who could issue fines. Thames Water's performance for small bursts was on a par with the rest of the country, but poor in relation to large bursts. One off funding had been agreed by the Thames Water Board to try to tackle this; 40 water tankers would be purchased to supply drinking water to residents in the event of a major burst; and specially trained technicians would be used to repair major bursts as soon as possible.
- In terms of prioritising bursts, bursts which posed significant danger/health and safety issues were dealt with first. After this, the company prioritised bursts which had a high impact on customers and/or which were resulting in a large volume of water loss.

4.5 The Committee discussed communication. Although Councillors found Natacha Israel very responsive, the Committee felt that Thames Water's communication in general was poor, especially with customers. It was felt that sometimes, using twitter was the only way to illicit a timely response. This was particularly the case where works were delayed. The Committee discussed two examples which highlighted the company's poor communication when work did not go to plan – works in Vesta Road and Friendly Gardens. Thames Water accepted that performance needed to improve, stated that the Board recognised this and reported that the

Executive Team was intent on driving improvement. An investment programme had been approved (the Board had agreed to an additional £2bn of investment on top of the £9.6bn allowed by the regulator) and community engagement was a priority. In relation to the Friendly Gardens situation, it was noted that the Millennium Water Main had been laid incorrectly and voids had led to failure. It was proving very complex to bring this main back into use, but it was essential to Thames Water's long-term plans and work was being prioritised. There had been a delay as the company had needed to seek approval for a new technique it wanted to use.

4.6 Carl Leadbetter spoke to Members about waste water management:

- Waste water operations had been configured to align with local authority areas and there were good contacts with local Flooding Officers.
- Locally the system was a gravity system with only a few pumping stations required, which was ideal, and Lewisham was high performing in terms of waste water.
- There were six sustainable drainage schemes approved in the area and the Tideway tunnel would reduce discharges into rivers.
- The monitoring system was fairly effective at giving advance warnings of system overloads.
- Lewisham was not a hotspot for blockages caused by wet wipes or fat and oil, which was positive.
- Work on the "Super Sewer" under the Thames was progressing (including plans relating to the Deptford Church street site) with completion expected in 2025.

4.7 Members emphasised the importance of engaging with the community on flooding, including on the crossness catchment strategy.

4.8 The Committee agreed to suspend standing orders so that the meeting could continue beyond 2.5 hours. Members discussed Thames Water's community development / social value work and noted that the company's apprenticeship scheme had gone live a few weeks' ago. It was agreed that more information on Thames Water's social value policy would be provided following the meeting.

4.9 **RESOLVED:** That Thames Water be requested to:

1. Develop a SMART improvement plan to address poor performance in Lewisham, including attendance times in relation to emergency events and the length of time excavations are open in relation to both planned and unplanned events.
2. Ensure that the improvement plan includes allocating sufficient resource to deal with emergencies, as when emergency events occur concurrently there are regularly significant delays in attendance.
3. Ensure that all planned and unplanned activity is clearly communicated to businesses and residents.

4. Ensure that the compensation policy for businesses and residents affected by water leaks is clear and accessible.
5. Commit to working with the Council to:
 - deliver required improvements to its emergency response
 - produce and deliver costed, joint investment plans for managing surface water, based on detailed local risk maps and modelling going forwards - in line with National Infrastructure Commission recommendations for 2025 and the need for locally agreed targets*
 - ensure that Lewisham benefits from its social value policy and that the benefits are in line with agreed priorities, including apprenticeship opportunities.

The meeting ended at 9.32 pm

Chair:

Date:

**The Government has not yet responded to the National Infrastructure Commission recommendations and some of the recommendations might require changes to current flood risk management arrangements. Whilst the council will engage in making plans for the management of surface water this does not currently equate to having responsibility to fund the infrastructure where risk exists.*