

MINUTES OF THE SAFER STRONGER COMMUNITIES SELECT COMMITTEE

Thursday, 5 September 2024 at 7.00 pm

IN ATTENDANCE: Councillors Liam Shrivastava (Chair), Chris Best (Vice-Chair), Sophie Davis, Hau-Yu Tam, Huynh and James-J Walsh Rudi Schmidt

ALSO JOINING THE MEETING VIRTUALLY: Councillor David Walker

APOLOGIES: Councillors Laura Cunningham and Rosie Parry

ALSO PRESENT: Councillors James-J Walsh (Cabinet Member for Inclusive Regeneration and Planning) and Edison Huynh (Cabinet Member for Culture and Communities), Jeremy Chambers (Director of Law and Corporate Governance), Helen Clarke (Director of Communications and Engagement), James Lee (Director of Communities), Alex Glanz (Head of the Chief Executive's Office), Benjamin Awkal (Scrutiny Manager)

ALSO PRESENT VIRTUALLY: Councillor David Walker, Petra Marshall and Councillor Oana Olaru-Holmes (Cabinet Member for Safer Lewisham, Refugees and Equalities) and Petra Marshall (Senior Programme Manager)

NB: Those Councillors listed as joining virtually were not in attendance for the purposes of the meeting being quorate, any decisions taken or to satisfy the requirements of s85 Local Government Act 1972

1. Minutes of previous meeting

RESOLVED

That the minutes of the meeting held on 22 July 2024 be agreed as an accurate record.

2. Declarations of interest

There were none.

3. Responses from Mayor and Cabinet

There were none.

4. Organisational Equalities

Witnesses

Cllr Oana Olaru-Holmes, Cabinet Member for Safer Lewisham, Refugees and Equalities

Helen Clarke, Director of Communications and Engagement

Alex Glanz, Head of the Chief Executive's Office

Key points from discussion

The Cabinet Member and Head of the Chief Executive's Office introduced the report. Key points included:

- 4.1. The Mayor and Cabinet wanted the council to work and deliver for all residents of Lewisham.
- 4.2. A key function of the Single Equalities Framework (SEF) was to help services prioritise activity.

The Committee then put questions to witnesses. Key points raised in the discussion included:

- 4.3. Some Committee members felt council's overarching strategy regarding equalities could be clearer.
- 4.4. Committee members suggested that not all of the proposed measures for the objectives in the new SEF were as specific and measurable as they could have been. The measures for the objective of *Improving how we engage and co-produce with our residents* could go beyond consultation and relate to general communication with residents and transparency and could also include how consultations were promoted to residents.
- 4.5. While there were a range of indicators which could be used in relation to consultation, it was more difficult to measure co-production.
- 4.6. The majority of council services and policies were aimed, to a certain extent, at reducing inequality. The intent when drafting the new SEF was to have objectives with a small number of precise measures in order to effectively drive improvement in a focused manner. Directorate-level action plans set out the specific steps services were to take in support of the objectives, including partnership activities.
- 4.7. The SEF could contain narrative exhibiting an understanding of the connections between protected characteristics and inequality and how inequality might be present in people's access to, and experience of, council services. Anecdotal evidence could also help exemplify how residents experienced inequality, alongside quantitative evidence.
- 4.8. Staff at all levels of seniority were represented on the Corporate Equalities Board as the Chairs of the self-selecting staff fora had seats on the Board.
- 4.9. The equalities prisms were not objectives, but rather lenses through which officers assessed the potential equality impacts of proposed decisions. They had been removed from the SEF but would continue to be used for their primary purpose of assisting officers to complete Equality Impact Assessments.
- 4.10. Service plans were refreshed biennially. Directorate equality action plans were to be refreshed in the years service plans were not.
- 4.11. It was more difficult to undertake demographic monitoring of, the generally more-representative, offline consultation activities than online consultations.
- 4.12. Equalities data relating to the Council's workforce could be considered when the Committee reviewed worked workforce equalities.
- 4.13. The Disability Policy Officer post was to be recruited to imminently.

ACTIONS

1. The Head of the Chief Executive's office to confirm in writing whether the Warm Welcomes programme was to be repeated in 2024/25.
2. The Head of the Chief Executive's office to confirm in writing whether staff equality impact assessments were undertaken in relation to the effects of council policy changes on staff.

RESOLVED

To recommend that –

1. The new Single Equalities Framework objectives be clearer and more measurable, with specific metrics and anecdotal evidence used;
2. metrics regarding ethnicity pay gaps, staff retention, representation across all levels of management, and representativeness of service delivery and resident engagement be added to the Single Equalities Framework;
3. an understanding of how inequality impacts people in domains including housing, employment, education and food be added to the Single Equalities Framework; and
4. there be greater trade union engagement on equalities matters and the Corporate Equalities Board include trade union representation.

5. Community Assets Policy

Witnesses

Cllr Edison Huynh, Cabinet Member for Culture and Communities

Cllr James-J Walsh, Cabinet Member for Inclusive Regeneration and Planning

James Lee, Director of Communities

Petra Marshall, Senior Programme Manager

Key points from discussion

The Cabinet Members and Senior Programme Manager introduced the report. Key points included:

- 5.1. The Policy was about fairness, transparency, sustainability and social good. Varied and historic arrangements with voluntary and community sector and private sector tenants were to be streamlined and regularised, as would the allocation of buildings to community groups needing them. The provision of longer leases would better enable voluntary sector organisations to meet residents needs and attract external funding. The Community Assets Principles, which would be appended to all leases, would support the voluntary and community sector to meet the aspirations and needs of Lewisham's diverse community in a fair and transparent manner.
- 5.2. The council was committed to ensuring its voluntary and community sector remained key partners.
- 5.3. There was an expectation that Community Asset tenants delivered social value. This needed to be monitored with the same rigour as financial disbursements.
- 5.4. The Community Asset Policy sat under the Asset Management Strategy.
- 5.5. The Policy would deliver revenue savings in respect of repairs and maintenance.

- 5.6. The Council intended to largely move away from directly managing community assets.
- 5.7. Annual building compliance checks were to be undertaken by the Corporate Health and Safety Team.
- 5.8. Where existing tenants satisfied the Policy and Principles, the council would seek to agree leases with them. Where there were multiple tenants or no suitable existing tenant, the council was to use an expression of interest process to identify suitable tenants.

The Committee then put questions to the witnesses. Key points included:

- 5.9. The burden of managing buildings was significant. Officers were open to a number of buildings being managed under a head lease or by a coalition of organisations. Voluntary sector organisations were to be encouraged to work together and provide mutual support. There were some buildings where there were essentially head tenants already.
- 5.10. In most cases, to ensure buildings were warm, watertight, compliant and safe, capital was to be invested in repairs via the Corporate Estate Maintenance Programme before leases were agreed. The Programme also aimed to improve buildings' energy efficiency.
- 5.11. Long leases were likely to place all insurance and maintenance responsibilities on tenants. Responsibilities under internal repairing and insuring leases were set out in the matrix in Appendix 3 of the report, although there was scope for negotiation.
- 5.12. It was recognised that facilities management could present a significant financial and psychological burden and not all voluntary organisations would be able to manage buildings and that organisations' ability to manage buildings would change. The council needed to be open, honest, understanding and compassionate with voluntary organisations regarding their ability to manage buildings and recognise the situation of each building and locality would be different and nuanced.
- 5.13. It was suggested by the Committee that:
 - it could be beneficial for condition surveys to be undertaken before leases were granted (necessary repairs had been identified already);
 - it could be appropriate for responsibility for statutory electricals to remain with the council;
 - local councillors should be notified of any changes in building management; and
 - that Principle 7 could include further specific examples of purposes for which tenants would be required to release their building for Council use, including councillor surgeries, community assemblies, and local planning meetings.
- 5.14. References to commercial rents in the report related to situations where there were pre-existing commercial operations in buildings, predominantly private nurseries. It was intended that they be subject to normal commercial rates. How rents would be determined was questioned. The majority of leases would be for community purposes at initially nominal rents.
- 5.15. The council was to work closely with tenants. If towards the end of leases at nominal rents tenants were not ready to begin paying rent, the value of their services to the community relative to the lost income would be considered.
- 5.16. The limited resource across the voluntary and community sector, which was usually more focused on delivery, to undertake facilities management was

acknowledged. The council had to understand organisations before it granted them leases. There was some resource in Lewisham Local and larger voluntary and community sector organisations to support organisations; mutual support and knowledge sharing were to be promoted. The primary task was to make organisations aware of how difficult it was to manage buildings and the areas they would need to strengthen in order to be ready to do so, foremost of which was financial management.

- 5.17. The council had limited resources and providing any further support to VCS organisations in respect of facilities management would require the diversion of resource from elsewhere.
- 5.18. The initial leases to be granted were informed by a prior review of community assets.
- 5.19. The September Mayor and Cabinet decision was to include the grant of seven initial leases, out of a total of 40 community assets.
- 5.20. The London Civic Strength index provided breakdowns of the strength of local VCS groups down to ward level.

Standing order 10 was suspended and Cllrs Davis and Walker left the meeting at 9.24 pm.

- 5.21. Tenants would be able to buy into the Council's bulk energy contract, offering them significant savings.
- 5.22. Where government funding was available, the Council was seeking to electrify its estate.

ACTIONS

1. The Senior Programme Manager to incorporate suggestions made by the Committee in the Community Assets Policy where practicable.
2. The Director of Communities to confirm in writing whether leased community buildings' carbon emissions were to be included in the council's carbon monitoring and what carbon targets and EPC requirements would apply to them.

RESOLVED

To recommend that the community asset handbook include advice regarding the national and regional organisations that could support voluntary sector organisations to manage their tenancies appropriately.

6. Select Committee work programme

- 6.1. The Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed to propose that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee consider an item on workforce equalities at a future meeting; and to invite the members of the Safer Stronger Communities Select Committee to that meeting.

RESOLVED

To note the report.

The meeting ended at 9.47 pm

Chair:

Date:
