

MINUTES OF OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Wednesday, 12 July 2023
(7:00 - 9:17 pm)

Present: Cllr Glenda Paddle (Chair), Cllr Dorothy Akwaboah (Deputy Chair), Cllr Andrew Achilleos, Cllr Fatuma Nalule, Cllr Ingrid Robinson, Cllr Paul Robinson, Cllr Muazzam Sandhu and Cllr Mukhtar Yusuf

Also Present: Cllr Saima Ashraf and Cllr Elizabeth Kangethe

Apologies: Cllr Phil Waker, Sajjad Ali, and Richard Hopkins

7. Declaration of Members' Interests

There were no declarations of interest.

8. Minutes (7 June 2023)

The minutes of the meeting held on 7 June 2023 were confirmed as correct.

9. Readiness for the SEND Area Inspection

The Commissioning Director, Education (CDE), delivered a presentation which covered the following issues:

- Local Area SEND Inspections - key questions;
- Local Area SEND Self Evaluation Form (SEF) and Action Plan;
- Local Area SEND SEF – Priorities;
- The SEND Local Area Inspection Framework;
- Local Area Action Plan;
- Thematic Review of Alternative Provision (Ofsted, Care Quality Commission and Social Care);
- Priority Actions; and
- Inspection Preparation.

In response to questions from the Committee, the CDE and the Head of SEND stated that:

- The Covid-19 pandemic had exacerbated the challenges within SEND services and the system was now clearly seeing some of the impacts, including an unprecedented level of need;
- The Council works closely with Health partners to deliver services to children and young people with SEND; however, there were significant challenges both in Health and within the Council, including a large number of vacancies which were very difficult to recruit to, and the Borough had been historically underfunded compared to neighbouring boroughs, which meant that budgets were always lagging behind demand;
- There were two main approaches the Council and its partners were taking to respond to the challenges in recruitment- the first could be described as 'growing our own' where those with an interest and a basic level of experience in providing SEND services would be supported to train and

qualify as Education Psychologists to then return and provide services in the Borough, and the second was to recruit to more senior positions and think creatively about how these posts could deliver SEND services more widely;

- There was more the Council and partners could do to include the voices of a wider range of young people and families when evaluating SEND services, and there were actions being taken around this, for example, the person recruited to the new Family Liaison Post would be tasked with creating groups for young people to join from September this year, which would be used for direct feedback. Furthermore, services were required to complete a SEND Self Evaluation Frameworks, which were working documents and regularly updated as a result of new learnings;
- It was acknowledged that schools were under pressure; however, much of this pressure related to factors such as the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic and the cost of living. Schools received a level of basic SEND funding and this was topped up depending on their individual SEND need levels, which would be evidenced by audits;
- The development of a fourth special school in the Borough, being funded by the DfE, was in the pipeline and had been delayed. It was expected that the school would be open in 2025 and have places for 100 pupils, including those with profound learning difficulties;
- The data used to evaluate the SEND service was taken from various sources, including the SEND needs assessment which considered a range of factors such as travel time to get to particular schools, commissioning of arts provision, and the impacts on the family and the outcomes of services;
- Informal approaches had been made to boroughs with lower levels of need to consider whether they could trade specialist SEND services with the Council; unfortunately, this was a very difficult market and the Council had been unable to purchase services from other boroughs to date;
- Mayesbrook School and Five Elms School had some very high-quality SEND provision, and the deaf ARP particularly, had been acknowledged by inspectors as excellent;
- The Council did use unregistered alternative SEND provision; however, it only did so after undertaking quality assurance checks and if any provision was found to be below standard, it would decommission the provision. It was important to note that sometimes unregistered provision can be more flexible and therefore more tailored to the needs of particular children;
- It was acknowledged that more robust checks needed to be in place to ensure funding allocated to schools for SEND provision was effectively put towards children with SEND to strengthen the trust and confidence held by both the Council and families in the system; and
- The Council had put in place arrangements which provided schools with additional funding without the need for an Education, Health and Care Plan, the aim being getting resources to schools as rapidly as possible.

10. Tackling Unemployment and Inactivity in Barking and Dagenham

The Council's Strategic Head of Inclusive Economy, Employment and Skills (SHES) delivered a presentation on Tackling Unemployment and Inactivity in Barking and Dagenham, which covered:

- Context;

- Unemployment as a borough priority and the Corporate Plan;
- Inclusive Economy, Employment & Skills;
- Supporting the hardest to reach – a review;
- Strengths of the existing offer;
- Areas for development;
- Good practice;
- expanding our cross-council work;
- Challenges; and
- Job Shop performance overview 2022-23

In response to questions from the Committee, the SHES stated that:

- The figure of 4.9% in the report referred to the percentage of people in the Borough who were unemployed and the figure of 24.8% referred to those who were economically inactive – these were two different groups, with the latter referring to those who were not required to look for work. It was important to note that the term ‘economically inactive’ included people who may not be looking for work but added much value to their local communities in other ways and were not a burden to public services;
- National childcare provision and entitlements have a huge impact on employment levels. For example, the take up of free childcare for those on Universal Credit had historically been low as people were put off by the requirement to pay up front and then request reimbursement. It was assumed that the proposed increase in childcare provision to 30 hours for 3- to 4-year-olds could have a positive impact on employment levels; however, this would also depend on other factors including the number of places and how childcare providers respond to the changes;
- Black/Black British females were those most likely to be qualified to Level 4+, followed closely by Black/Black British males and Asian/Asian British males and females but also, the highest rate of unemployment in Barking & Dagenham was amongst residents of mixed ethnicity (both sexes) and Black/Black British residents (both sexes). Service users of the Council’s job brokerage service reflected the demographic of the Borough, and the Council was doing some targeted work to ensure disadvantaged communities were engaging with employment support, such as working closely with the Adult College, debt advice service, social care, community outreach approaches, and building partnerships with faith groups. The Strategic Director for Inclusive Growth noted that the above data was taken from the last Census and it was important to note that as the Borough was a fast changing one, trends since the Census may have already shifted and furthermore, that the significant number of new residents moving into the Borough to take advantage of its growing housing offer, would not have benefitted from much of the investments made in transforming the Borough’s schools and educational provision;
- The visibility of the Council’s employment support services needed to be improved. There were plans to update the Service’s digital presence to make it more interesting and engaging. More work also needed to be done with the Council’s Communications team in relation to using social media more creatively, and conversations around this had already begun. Having said this, visibility in relation to employment support in some sectors such as the new film studios, was high. The Job Brokerage Service also held regular in-person job fairs to engage residents, including a large one in

Barking Town Centre recently attended by over 500 people, where employers were present to speak to people about a range of careers;

- There was a dedicated website where residents could find out about opportunities linked to the new film studios. The Council had worked closely with the film sector's skills body, ScreenSkills, to understand what the skills gaps were to help create pathways into secure careers. Work was now taking place with the industry and local training providers to develop training pathways in set building (joinery and carpentry), lighting (electrical installation) and production finance. There was also a longer-term ambition to create pathways to more senior jobs such as set, lighting and production design. Once established, the ambition would be to try to support 20-50 residents a year into meaningful careers in the film sector, as well as brokering job and supply chain opportunities, and supporting understanding of the sector through local school careers programmes;
- The Council's main source of quantitative data for the employment review was the Census, but this was also supplemented by qualitative work with target groups, wider evidence from services and the Council's own administrative data;
- The Council was working with primary and secondary schools around improving food education, which was supported by resources from the City of London linked to the relocation of London's wholesale markets. There were plans to build a food school, working with Barking and Dagenham College and create future pathways into careers in the food industry. With regards to retention levels, the Council strived to support people into careers with good job prospects, for example, many of the opportunities being targeted in the film and food sectors were ones that could lead to better positions for those who wish to advance their careers in that industry. The Council's Inclusive Growth and Adult Social Care teams were jointly implementing an Action Plan to improve the pay, quality, security and progression opportunities of jobs in social care, in order to improve retention levels and attract more people to apply;
- The sector programmes led by the Council's Inclusive Growth Service focussed on areas where there was projected to be jobs growth in the Borough. The Council was working with young people and parents to support them to understand the self-employed nature of jobs in the film sector, which may only appeal to those with an entrepreneurial mindset who were interested in working in the film sector. It was key for entry level jobs and the support the Council provides to be designed in a way that gave the person the relevant experience to progress in their career pathway in the sector and grow their income;
- The food sector had both jobs that were highly skilled and well paid and low paid jobs with low security. The Council's food sector strategic aims were to both create pathways into good jobs, as well as improving job quality standards in other parts of the sector – for example, by promoting Barking and Dagenham's Council-owned, London Living Wage school catering service;
- It was acknowledged that sustained employment outcomes were not where the Council wanted them to be. Various factors impacted this, including the use of fixed term contracts, as well as people's personal circumstances such as being a carer, which meant that their employment did not fit in with the other things going on in their lives; and,
- The Council's Job Brokerage Service provided quality accredited, one-to-

one, tailored support with job applications, interviews and various testing methods.

Members posed a number of further questions, which the SHES would respond to in writing at a later time.

[Following the meeting, a correction was made to the statement made in 2.1 of the report, which should have read "Of people aged 16 and over who were not in employment, Barking & Dagenham had the 3rd highest proportion (in England & Wales) who had never worked (42%)"].

11. Heritage Services Overview

The Cabinet Member for Community Leadership & Engagement introduced a report providing an overview of Heritage Services, expressing pride in the Borough's history and heritage which offered historical sites such as Eastbury Manor House, Valence House, as well as the future Woman's Museum. The Borough was one of the fastest changing in the country, making equality and diversity at the heart of everything the Council did, as reflected in its refreshed Corporate Plan. Having said that, culture and heritage was an area that had been de-prioritised in the face of austerity and financial challenges, which meant that these services had to find creative solutions to continue these services and make them at the heart of our communities.

The Head of Culture (HC) delivered a presentation on the Council's Heritage Service, which covered the following:

- Staff roles and services on offer;
- Adapting services to meet the needs of residents going forward;
- Becontree Forever Programme;
- Financial challenges arising from chronic underfunding;
- Key areas of focus over the next 3 years;
- Risks and Obstacles and strategies to overcome these; and
- Difficult decisions ahead to protect the Borough's heritage.

Standing Orders were suspended at this juncture, to allow the meeting to continue beyond 9.00 pm.

In response to questions, the Director for Inclusive Growth (DIG) and the HC, stated that:

- Delaying the Women's Museum was not the solution to the Heritage Service's financial challenges, which had been primarily caused by chronic underfunding spanning over more than a decade, and using very traditional models of funding, which were no longer viable. To bring the Service to a more financially stable position, the Council would need to make some difficult decisions, increase its fund-raising efforts, and build solid working partnerships by engaging with third sector organisations, the community and volunteers. Some Community Infrastructure Levy funds had been identified to support the Women's Museum so that there would be no in-year budgetary pressures for the next two years by opening this site. After two years however, the Museum would need to find a financially sustainable model to continue running. Ideas around how this could be achieved were already being considered, such as the renting of spaces to companies

- looking for workshop spaces;
- The Council did recognise the good name of the National Trust and worked closely with them where possible – for example, Eastbury Manor House was listed on the National Trust website and they had also taken on Stoneford Cottage; however, as conditions, the green spaces and kitchen would need to be refurbished.; and
- There was wide kudos and recognition that the Council's heritage sites were valuable spaces for the community, for example Valence House had been nominated for the family friendly museum award; however, the challenges in Heritage services were a result of an accumulation of underfunding over a number of years and would take time to address.

Councillor Achilleos commented that he felt strongly that consideration should be given to postponing the opening of the Women's Museum for one or more financial years until the local authority had built more financial resilience into the heritage sector. Whilst he recognised the importance and significance of the museum delivery for local women and the Council's ongoing commitment to equality and diversity, until it could bring down the annual overspend across the sector by utilising a combination of grant funding and more innovative asset management, he was concerned that the addition of a new museum would not be financially responsible. He also stated that he would feed back to the office of the MP for Dagenham and Rainham, where Valence House was located, the need to use its communications functions to encourage investment and support statements to support bids for improvements to the site.

Members made a number of further comments in relation to overcoming the current financial challenges within the Council's heritage services, summarised below:

- It was clear that the HC had worked tirelessly to raise funds. The Service was encouraged to look at commercially advertising the sites for new purposes; and
- Difficult decisions would need to be made in relation to staffing; however, staff need to be utilised in a new, more commercial way to raise income- for example, by encouraging businesses to use the sites for their conferences or workshops, or perhaps even looking at offering one of the sites to the public as a wedding venue, which the Borough did not currently have.

12. Work Programme

The Work Programme was agreed.