

MINUTES OF ASSEMBLY

Wednesday, 23 September 2015
(7:00 - 8:16 pm)

PRESENT

Cllr Tony Ramsay (Chair)
Cllr Syed Ghani (Deputy Chair)

Cllr Syed Ahammad	Cllr Jeanne Alexander	Cllr Saima Ashraf
Cllr Melanie Bartlett	Cllr Simon Bremner	Cllr Sade Bright
Cllr Laila Butt	Cllr Peter Chand	Cllr Josephine Channer
Cllr Faruk Choudhury	Cllr Edna Fergus	Cllr Irma Freeborn
Cllr Cameron Geddes	Cllr Rocky Gill	Cllr Kashif Haroon
Cllr Chris Hughes	Cllr Amardeep Singh Jamu	Cllr Jane Jones
Cllr Elizabeth Kangethe	Cllr Eileen Keller	Cllr Giasuddin Miah
Cllr Dave Miles	Cllr Margaret Mullane	Cllr Adegboyega Oluwole
Cllr Moin Quadri	Cllr Hardial Singh Rai	Cllr Chris Rice
Cllr Lynda Rice	Cllr Darren Rodwell	Cllr Faraaz Shaukat
Cllr Danielle Smith	Cllr Sam Tarry	Cllr Bill Turner
Cllr Dominic Twomey	Cllr Lee Waker	Cllr Phil Waker
Cllr Maureen Worby	Cllr Dan Young	Cllr Linda Zanitchkhah

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Cllr Sanchia Alasia	Cllr Abdul Aziz	Cllr Evelyn Carpenter
Cllr Danielle Lawrence	Cllr Mick McCarthy	Cllr James Ogunbose
Cllr Linda Reason	Cllr Liam Smith	Cllr Jeff Wade
Cllr John White		

20. Declaration of Members' Interests

There were no declarations of interest.

21. Minutes (15 July 2015)

The minutes of the meeting held on 15 July 2015 were confirmed as correct.

22. Minutes of Sub-Committees

The Assembly received and noted the minutes of the following:

- JNC Appointments Panel held on 15 July 2015 at 1.00pm
- JNC Appointments Panel held on 15 July 2015 at 3.00pm
- JNC Appointments Panel held on 16 September 2015*

(* The Chair agreed that this item could be considered at the meeting under the provisions of Section 100B(4)(b) of the Local Government Act 1972.)

23. Leader's Statement

The Leader of the Council presented a verbal statement updating the Assembly on a range of matters which included:

- The 50th Anniversary Events, of which 70 had taken place over the summer had to date attracted over 100,000 people

The highlight of the events this Summer for the Leader, Members and many residents was the visit from Her Majesty The Queen in July, which put the Borough of the Map.

The events were not yet over, with the second annual Youth Parade being led by the first ever Young Mayor on Sunday 27 September.

- The appointment of the new Strategic Director of Growth and Homes, which would complete the new leadership team to take the Council forward. The Leader reminded Assembly that he had set the Chief Executive the task of reducing management costs throughout the organisation over the next few years, a commitment he had made and intended to keep.
- The Ambition 2020 programme, which had been launched and would take a fresh look at the way the Council provides its services in the face of a £70m reduction in the Council's finances as a result of cuts from Central Government.
- The Growth Commission's task was to assist in realising the Borough's ambition of becoming London's Growth Opportunity. Through this the Borough will forge a new relationship with residents, and be better placed to become London's Cultural hub with first class services.
- Two new Borough Champion appointments namely Councillor Bright as the Borough's "Women and Equalities Champion" and Councillor Ahammad as the "Making a Change Champion" to help promote healthier lifestyles
- Congratulations, to Jeremy Corbyn and Tom Watson as the new Labour Leader and Deputy Leader respectively; Sadiq Khan and Ummesh Desai who secured the Labour Group nominations for the London Mayor and City and East GLA seat respectively, as well as Margaret Hodge, MP who was recently appointed a Dame.

24. Appointments

There were no appointments to Council Committees and/or other bodies.

25. Senior Management Appointments

(The Chair agreed that the report could be considered at the meeting under the provisions of Section 100B(4)(b) of the Local Government Act 1972.)

The Chief Executive introduced a report on the recommendation of the JNC

Appointments Panel which, on 22 September 2015, had interviewed candidates for the post of Strategic Director – Growth and Homes.

The Assembly **resolved** to approve that John East be appointed as the role of Strategic Director – Growth and Homes, subject to agreement on start dates.

26. Questions With Notice

Question 1

From Councillor Ahammad

“Following the announcement of the government on 7 September 2015, that Britain should resettle up to 20,000 Syrian refugees – what can our borough offer to help in this global crisis and has it been communicated to the RSMP (Regional Strategic Migration Partnership)?”

Response

Councillor Rodwell, Leader of the Council, expressed his concern at the harrowing situation so many refugees were currently in and advised that the Council had made it clear to RSMP that it would play a full part alongside other London boroughs as it had a moral duty to help.

The Government had announced that Britain will resettle 20,000 Syrian refugees over 5 years. The Government was developing in consultation with the London Government Association the details and funding of how the resettlement would work. The Council had set up an internal officer working group to ensure that it was able to respond effectively.

The Leader further advised that the Council was keen to work with voluntary, faith, and community members, and he would be meeting representatives of the local Citizens Advice Bureau and Refugee & Migrant Forum of Essex and London on 1 October 2015.

Supplementary Question

Councillor Ahammad advised that the London Borough of Camden had announced they would accept 20 families and enquired as to whether this was a commitment the Council could make.

Councillor Rodwell reiterated the Council's commitment to helping refugees and confirmed that as yet, nothing had been asked of the Council.

Question 2

From Councillor Fergus

“Can the Leader advise Assembly what role the Council is playing in responding to the Syrian refugee crisis?”

Response

Reiterating his response to the previous question Councillor Rodwell, emphasised the Council's commitment to undertake whatever was feasibly possible to help the refugees and he confirmed that, following a call from the Shadow Minister, Barking

and Dagenham were the first Council to confirm they would assist in the crisis.

Question 3

From Councillor Freeborn

“In the light of the Government’s sinister assault on the rights of working people (the Trades Union Bill) will the Deputy Leader & Cabinet Member for Central Resources give his assurance that we will continue to give the highest priority to good industrial relations on this Council?”

Response

Councillor Twomey, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance and Central Services as a long standing union member opposed the Bill suggesting that it sought to curb some of the basic rights trade unions had enjoyed even when Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister. The Bill was designed to impose draconian measures which would worsen, not improve, industrial relations.

Councillor Twomey said that the Council was committed to working with the unions and had enjoyed good relations over the years, which were being rebuilt after strike action earlier this year.

Supplementary Question

Councillor Freeborn asked if the Bill was successful, what option was there for investment in employees.

Councillor Twomey referred to the staff temperature check already being undertaken to engage with staff and ascertain their views. Recent results had indicated that three out of four staff were proud to work for the Council. Six out of ten staff thought it was a great place to work whilst eight out of ten were committed to the Council’s vision.

Question 4

From Councillor Choudhury

“Can the Cabinet Member for Housing set out the main challenges facing the Council’s housing services and what we are doing to deliver a service which matches our ambitions for the future?”

Response

Councillor Rodwell explained that over the past 12 months, the average time to re-let a council property was down from 70 to 46 days, the percentage of repair jobs where the Council have kept to appointments is up from 73% to 91% and all urgent repair jobs have been completed within government guidelines.

Councillor Rodwell advised that in order for the Council to be in the top 25% of London Authorities, he had launched a Housing Transformation Programme, the outcome of which would be presented to Cabinet in December.

Question 5

From Councillor Haroon

“Will the Leader agree with me that the Government’s cuts to tax credits announced last week are a direct attack on working families in Barking & Dagenham. In contrast, can the Leader give his assurance that tackling inequality and promoting inclusion will remain at the heart of everything we do as a Labour Council?”

Response

Councillor Rodwell, gave assurances that the Council would continue to tackle inequality and promoting inclusion would be at the heart of its agenda. He was proud of the Borough’s history in this respect with it being the home both to the first feminist and the man who abolished slavery as well as more recently the political fight in defeating the rise of the BNP.

He stated that this Council were taking a unique approach to tackling inequality by concentrating on one group at a time, starting with gender equality in 2015/16. Officers were currently working with the Fawcett Society on the Gender Equality Charter which would be launched on International Women’s Day, 8 March 2016. In 2016/17, the focus would be on looking at the barriers for the local LGBT community.

Question 6

From Councillor Kangethe

“Can the Cabinet Member for Regeneration set out what the borough is set to gain from having a Growth Commission?”

Response

Councillor Rodwell, explained that the Growth Commission would help to achieve the Council’s vision of improving the future economic prospects the people who live and work in the Borough.

The Commission would provide authoritative expert advice on how the vision can be achieved, what needs to be done, and by whom.

Question 7

From Councillor Hughes

“Can the Cabinet Member for Housing confirm this Council’s vital commitment to the provision of affordable housing for local residents and how we are going to enshrine fairness in our housing allocation policy?”

Response

Councillor Ashraf, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Housing, advised that the Council remained passionate about providing affordable housing for local people. Only last week the Guardian newspaper featured an article on the ground-breaking work undertaken by Barking and Dagenham Reside who manage the lettings process for all new affordable rented homes in the Borough and where 84% of such properties in William Street, Thames View East and Richard Moore Court had been let to residents of Barking and Dagenham.

Councillor Ashraf announced this month the Council would be changing its Housing Lettings Policy bringing to an end the rights of those who own their own home to apply for Council housing, except in extreme circumstances. The Council would also suspend those bidding on properties if they turned down three reasonable offers.

Question 8

From Councillor Quadri

“Over the summer, RightMove dared to suggest we might be unhappy in Barking & Dagenham. Could the Leader clarify whether we are happy with RightMove?”

Response

Councillor Rodwell, confirmed that the Council was indeed not happy with RightMove following their claim that Barking and Dagenham was one of the unhappiest places to live.

He advised that that nine out of the ten places RightMove suggested were full of unhappy people were all in London, which to many is regarded as one of the best cities in the world to live. The Leader had written to the Chair of RightMove about the issue but to date had not received a reply.

Question 9

From Councillor Haroon

“Can I ask the Cabinet Member for Education to set out the progress made in this year’s GCSE and A level results?”

Response

Councillor Turner, Cabinet Member for Children’s Services and Social Care, advised that the early national results for A Levels indicated that schools overall had seen a 2% improvement in the number of A*-C’s which meant that the Borough was within 1% of the national average. The Borough had also improved on the top grades (A*-B) necessary for entry into the more competitive universities.

Councillor Turner pointed out that GCSE results nationally were not available until October, with a report going to Cabinet in November. However, the indications were that results for Barking and Dagenham on the headline five A*-C including English and maths fell by just over 3% to 55%.

He advised that the Cabinet Member for Education would be holding a briefing for Members on Monday 28 September where more detailed information regarding the results would be available for discussion, and he urged all Members to attend.

Question 10

From Councillor Kangethe

“Can the Cabinet Member for Crime & Enforcement confirm the Council’s policy of providing a free ‘grace period’ of parking around our shopping parades to help shoppers and promote local trade?”

Response

Councillor Butt, Cabinet Member for Crime & Enforcement, stated that as from this month no user of the Borough's car parks and pay and display bays would have to pay for the first 15 minutes of car parking.

Councillor Butt was hopeful that following discussions with local traders and residents improved access to parking in and around the shopping locations would make them more attractive to visit and by keeping the overall cost low for short stay parking the Council can help the locations to thrive.

Supplementary Question

Councillor Kangethe asked as to whether this extended to the small shopping parades in the Borough, such as Parsloes for example.

Councillor Butt reaffirmed the changes covered all car parks and pay and display bays.

Question 11

From Councillor P Waker

"Would the relevant Cabinet Member agree that the Council's agreed disciplinary procedures should be used for ALL staff including those who have worked for the Council, either directly or indirectly in schools etc, for under two years and that the Council will not support staff being dismissed without using the agreed procedures simply because they are not entitled under current laws to an Employment Tribunal."

Response

Councillor Twomey stated that it was expected that all Council employees should be managed according to agreed Council policies both in schools and educational centres where the Council was the ultimate employer.

Supplementary Question

Councillor Waker asked that if he provided details of a case where this had not happened, would the Cabinet Member look into it.

Councillor Twomey advised he would look into any such cases brought to his attention.

Question 12

From Councillor Bartlett

"With social housing now required more than ever in London and the South East, will the relevant Cabinet Member commit to ensuring that a percentage of social housing is agreed as part of every housing scheme, private or Council with the expectation that this will be a much higher figure for Council schemes than private, but that there will be a definite number in every scheme."

Response

Councillor Geddes, Cabinet Member for Regeneration, advised that the Council's Local Plan currently did not have an overall target. However despite this in 2013/14, 68% of all new homes built in the borough were affordable, the second highest percentage in London. To put this into context Barking and Dagenham had the fourth highest percentage of affordable housing of any London Borough at 35.9%.

Councillor Geddes reported that the Council was currently reviewing the Local Plan and was consulting on the issues and options in October which were agreed by Cabinet in July. This proposed a number of options for an overall affordable housing target ranging from 25%-40% of all new homes built and of those between 8 and 12% being social rent.

Supplementary Question

Councillor Bartlett asked for further clarification on the proposed affordable housing targets.

Councillor Geddes advised he would look into the details and respond directly to Councillor Bartlett.

Question 13

From Councillor Gill

“Could the relevant Cabinet Member please explain the recent decrease in GCSE results in Barking & Dagenham?”

Response

Councillor Turner, referring to his earlier response on this matter, advised that whilst some schools had out performed such as Robert Clack he acknowledged that some of the other school results had been disappointing. However this was against the backdrop of late changes in the marking criteria for certain subjects and a national shortage of maths teachers.

Supplementary Question

Councillor Gill asked what improvement plans were in place to achieve better results next year.

Councillor Turner reminded Members about the Cabinet Member for Education briefing on 28 September where more detailed information regarding the results would be available for discussion. Councillor Turner also took the opportunity to urge members to read the report being presented to Cabinet in November and also encouraged more Members to become involved in scrutiny.

Question 14

From Councillor Gill

“Does the Leader of the Council believe that the reported cost of the recent visit of the Queen to the borough at over £72k is good use of public money in the context of the up to £72m budget savings required & the £70k cut to pre-start for front line workers in Barking & Dagenham?”

Response

Councillor Rodwell felt that the money was well spent.

Supplementary Question

Councillor Gill asked if the Leader felt that remarks made to local residents by the Duke of Edinburgh when the Royal Party visited the Chadwell Heath Community Centre were disrespectful and whether he had written to seek an apology.

Councillor Rodwell expressed his dismay at the question and advised that the comment was meant and taken in jest by those present.

Over 10,000 residents had either been involved or viewed the activities on the day of Her Majesty’s visit. The Leader had been advised by organisers that it was one of the warmest receptions the Queen had received in a long time. The event had put the Borough on the map and therefore he considered the money was well spent.

Question 15

From Councillor Chand

“Does the relevant Cabinet Member agree that the reported high levels of childhood obesity in Barking & Dagenham must be tackled by restricting the growth of fast-food outlets in the borough and increasing physical activity in schools?”

Response

Councillor Worby, Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care and Health, advised that the Joint Health & Wellbeing Strategy outlined ambitious plans to create a borough that supports local people to make healthy choices now, as well as creating an environment which makes those choices easier and more accessible in the future.

She confirmed that over the last three years, she had worked with officers, partners and schools to invest significant resources in establishing the infrastructure and programmes to promote healthy eating and uptake of physical activity for lifelong health.

The Council had been at the forefront of using its powers and responsibilities to create a healthier environment in line with the Borough’s ambitions. In 2010 new planning guidance was introduced entitled ‘Saturation Point’. This aimed to reduce the risk of obesity amongst the borough's population, and particularly among children, by introducing a 400m hot food takeaway exclusion zone in proximity to schools and criteria to reduce the clustering of hot food takeaways in town centres. Since its implementation eight hot food takeaways had been refused planning permission.

Supplementary Question

Councillor Chand asked if there would be the opportunity to let children use the Council's leisure centres for free if they were deemed at risk.

Councillor Worby confirmed that whilst she could not make any commitments today she was currently looking into different programmes aimed at improving children's health including free swimming.

Question 16

From Councillor Bartlett

"Will the relevant Cabinet Member seek to ensure that every regeneration scheme on Council housing land will mean that there is no reduction in the percentage of social housing when the renewal takes place?"

Response

Councillor Geddes could not provide such a commitment but assured the member that every regeneration scheme would be considered on its merits. He added that such an approach with developers was neither practical nor viable and could seriously limit the Council's ability to deliver more social housing as well as other regeneration benefits.

Schemes such as those taking place at the Gascoigne estate which involve a substantial land take for a new school means there would be a lower percentage of social rent units. The whole context of social rented homes had changed with various Government policy and funding announcements limiting the scope to fund new social rent units through the HRA. This demonstrated the importance of using cross subsidy and other funding streams such as Housing Zones to achieve more affordable housing.

Question 17

From Councillor Mullane

"Village Ward has some private houses in Western Avenue and Mayswood Gardens, which appear to be houses of multiple occupancy, and some people have in the past few months taken to living in vans outside the properties, with no toilet facilities. The licensed Landlord team are undertaking the HMO issues, but the enforcement of the vehicles, and disorder issues are proving difficult for the Council enforcement Teams. Can the Cabinet member confirm that a system is in place to deal with these issues, as we have had 3 such issues in the past three months, which are taking 6 weeks at a time to be dealt with, with much distress to our communities?"

Response

Councillor Butt, advised that where it could be shown that a person and persons are living in a vehicle the Council had powers to direct them to leave with the vehicle. This power was exercised by a senior officer of the Council as a Direction Notice.

Councillor Butt advised the problem in the instances raised in Village ward had been proving that the vehicles were being used for habitation. Action here was limited by the evidence of occupation and activity here included tracing of vehicle ownership, speaking to residents where these came forward, observations at various times throughout the day and night and placing a camera at the location.

Question 18

From Councillor Mullane

“Does the Cabinet Member for Housing feel that in certain circumstances, a sensitive lets policy should be carried out for vulnerable people in our communities within our social housing stock?”

Response

Councillor Ashraf, explained that it was about exercising discretion when say someone had experience of a neighbour who had demonstrated challenging behaviour. In these circumstances the Council would sometimes use a sensitive lettings approach to decide how to let a property. By employing this approach the Council try to ensure successful tenancies which recognised the needs of the tenant who may have special needs, together with the community in which they are living. Each case was treated on its own merits.

Councillor Ashraf advised that this way the Council was trying to make best use of its housing stock at the same time as recognising that everyone should have a place to live and feel part of the local community rather than being isolated.

Supplementary Question

Councillor Mullane advised there was a large issue in her Ward currently regarding sensitive lettings and asked for the Policy to be considered at the relevant Select Committee.

Councillor Ashraf noted that Cllr Mullane had raised casework issues in previous questions at Assembly. Through the Chair, Cllr Mullane was encouraged to contact her directly rather than waiting until Assembly so that appropriate action could be considered at a much earlier stage.