

London Borough of Hammersmith & Fulham

Policy and Oversight Board Minutes



Wednesday 18 September 2024

PRESENT

Committee members: Councillors Lisa Homan (Chair), Jacolyn Daly, Natalia Perez, Nikos Souslous, Nicole Trehy, Rory Vaughan and Victoria Brocklebank-Fowler

Other Councillors

Councillor Rowan Ree (Cabinet Member for Finance and Reform)

Officers

Matthew Sales (Assistant Director, Programmes, Assurance and Analytics)

Nicola Ellis (Director, Chief Operating Officer, Corporate Services)

Yvonne Hadlames (Assistant Director, Contact Services)

Kayode Adewumi (Assistant Director, Democratic, Registration and Coroner's Services)

Zoe Wilkins (Electoral Services Manager)

David Abbott (Head of Governance)

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Helen Rowbottom.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS

There were no declarations of interest.

3. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

RESOLVED

The minutes of the meeting held on 29 April 2024 were agreed as an accurate record.

4. RESIDENT EXPERIENCE BRIEFING

Nicola Ellis (Director, Chief Operating Officer, Corporate Services) and Yvonne Hadlames (Assistant Director, Contact Services) presented the item and gave a presentation covering the following areas:

- Customer access to Council services
- The Resident Experience Access Programme (REAP)

- The Digital Inclusion Strategy, which the Board helped to co-produce
- Resident experience culture change
- Co-production

The Chair asked how the delivery of this work had progressed since the end of the Covid-19 pandemic. Nicola Ellis said there had been a focus on high priority areas like housing repairs which have made good progress, but there were other contact centres with opportunities to improve. The goal was to have consistently high performance across all service areas. The programme 'REAP Reignite' was looking at consolidating contact centres and using data to drive continuous improvement.

Councillor Victoria Brocklebank-Fowler asked how many contact centre staff worked in the borough and how many worked from home. Nicola Ellis said corporate contact centre staff worked on a rota system working some days in the office and some from home. Other contact centres had different arrangements – for example, the housing repairs team were all office based. Councillor Brocklebank Fowler asked for figures breaking down how many contact centre staff were office based and how many were working from home.

ACTION: Yvonne Hadlames

Councillor Brocklebank-Fowler noted that 46% of contacts were by telephone and suggested the reason was that people used the website for simple actions but called if they had complaints which were more complicated. Nicola Ellis said not all calls were complaints. She explained that a number of services were not available online, so users needed to call. But she agreed that ideally, when all services were available digitally, then only the most complex queries or those that required an assisted service would need to call.

Councillor Brocklebank-Fowler asked if officers had data on customer satisfaction from previous years. Nicola Ellis said up until recently there had only been ad hoc customer satisfaction surveys. Now they were working on a more consistent approach.

Councillor Brocklebank-Fowler noted that a resident she knew had tried to contact the council tax office by phone and had to wait for over 30 mins on two separate occasions. She asked if a callback option was available. Yvonne Hadlames said the telephony system did have a callback option so users didn't have to wait on the phone. She noted that the system currently gave users their number in the queue, but they were looking to move to an estimated wait time system.

Councillor Brocklebank-Fowler said she was shocked by the chart on page 33 of the agenda showing 42.3% of submitted reports on the Love Clean Streets app were for fly-tipping and suggested it was due to the Council doubling the bulky waste collection charge. Officers noted the data was from the app and did not represent the percentages for all complaints. Members asked for a breakdown of these complaints across all channels.

ACTION: Yvonne Hadlames

The Chair asked if officers tracked the percentage of people who used the callback feature and how long they waited. Yvonne Hadlames said callbacks were kept in the

same queue as live calls so when an advisor was available they would return the call.

The Chair asked if reports about fly-tipping made on housing land were dealt with differently. Yvonne Hadlames said in those cases reports would get passed on to the relevant estates team.

Councillor Rowan Ree (Cabinet Member for Finance and Reform), in response to Councillor Brocklebank-Fowler's point about fly-tipping, noted there had been no increases in fly-tipping and figures from January showed fly-tipping in the borough was down by a third. He then asked officers if there was any evidence that residents received worse customer service from contact centre operatives who were working from home. Nicola Ellis said working from home had worked well because operatives had fewer distractions and could work in a less noisy environment.

Councillor Ree discussed digitalisation of services, noting that many people wanted to interact with services quickly and efficiently online. He said the Council wanted to automate simpler, common tasks and processes to enable officers to focus on more complex queries.

Councillor Rory Vaughan highlighted the digital electoral registration process and how fast and effective it was. He then asked officers to speak about staff training, how services were ensuring consistency, and quality assurance. Yvonne Hadlames said the corporate contact centre had robust quality assurance checks that were undertaken on a weekly basis and advisors generally scored very highly. She added that not all contact centres had that in place, and she was working improvement boards to implement this across all centres.

Councillor Vaughan asked how easy it was to get customer feedback and how representative the feedback was. Yvonne Hadlames said they had piloted a customer feedback tool in the telephony system in the form of a survey offered at the end of every call which produced a good volume of feedback. Councillor Vaughan asked for more information on this system.

ACTION: Yvonne Hadlames

Councillor Vaughan, noting the different contact routes, asked if there was an effort to create a single point of contact. He gave the example of someone with multiple issues to resolve having to search for different phone numbers. Yvonne Hadlames said there was a mixture – the main contact centre covered a range of services and handled 21,000 calls a month. She said, while it was difficult to have one officer trained in every service area, they did have a system of 'warm transfers', meaning information was taken once at the first point of contact then transferred to the team who could deal with the query so users didn't have to repeat themselves. She also noted they tried to provide resilience by training officers to be cross-skilled on the most common areas. To improve this further going forward the Council was implementing a new Customer Relationship Management system that could capture resident data and send it to the relevant team. Nicola Ellis noted that was one of the key objectives of REAP – by having all processes and interactions available digitally the contact centre staff could access services directly and deal with resident enquiries themselves.

Councillor Natalia Perez asked if the Council tracked how many residents reported the same issues repeatedly and if improvements could be made there. Yvonne Hadlames said contact centres aimed to resolve the whole enquiry – all calls were coded by topic and officers were gathering what was resolved at first point of contact. Officers did plan to look at the data on repeat callers in the future.

Councillor Perez asked how the Council learned from complaints to provide better services. Nicola Ellis said services learned a lot from complaints. Complaints were reported to all service areas monthly, and trends were monitored corporately at SLT (Strategic Leadership Team) Assurance Board.

Councillor Jacolyn Daly asked if there was a dashboard that allowed Housing officers to see complaints data and how granular the data was (i.e. daily, weekly, monthly). Yvonne Hadlames said the Housing department were piloting a new complaints dashboard with data that was updated twice daily – which included the complaints received, the service area, how many issues had been closed, and the time taken to resolve them. The system was planned to be rolled out across the Council.

Councillor Daly asked what the ambition for the REAP was in terms of digitalisation and the timeline for implementation. She highlighted an example in the presentation from Octopus Energy of using screensharing to help users fill in forms online and asked if the Council had a timeline for implementing that technology locally. She also noted that expectations had increased and many people expected 24/7 access to services. Nicola Ellis said the REAP ambition was for all services to be accessible 24/7 digitally, but not telephone services. The programme was in the discovery phase looking at the technology available for screensharing. They wanted the best technology possible to support resident experience when the Council re-procured the service. She said it was difficult to give timelines, but officers were looking at consolidating the large number of different phone numbers and service inboxes. She said to expect incremental improvements over the next few years as different solutions came online.

Councillor Nikos Souslous asked what was driving the reported improvement in the housing repairs contact centre and what their KPIs were. Yvonne Hadlames said KPIs were not consistent across all services at present, but that was one of the goals of the REAP. She said the improvement in Housing was due to improved training, robust quality checks, and overall service improvement in housing repairs.

Councillor Souslous asked about trends in the abandonment rate for calls across council services. Yvonne Hadlames said the main contact centre was at 11.6% (just over the 10% target) for Q1, but that included the annual billing period for Council Tax which drove higher call volumes than normal. She added that there was a 1.9% abandonment rate in the housing repairs contact centre, which showed the variation across services.

The Chair thanked officers for the report and presentation and highlighted how it fit in with the work the Board had done on digital inclusion, artificial intelligence, and co-production to deliver the best experience for residents. She added that the Board

were interested in a follow-up item to discuss the results of the pilots and learning mentioned.

RESOLVED

1. That the Policy and Oversight Board noted and commented on the report.

5. CHANGES TO VOTING ENTITLEMENTS AND UPDATES TO ELECTIONS ACT 2022 IMPLEMENTATION

Zoe Wilkins (Electoral Services Manager) presented the report which updated the Board on the implementation of Elections Act 2022, including a review of voting and candidacy entitlements for European Union citizens resident in the borough, and the results of changes to absent voting and voter ID rules at the recent elections.

The Chair noted that some people said they didn't vote in the recent general election because they didn't have ID and weren't aware of Voter Authority Certificates (VACs). She noted there had been a communications campaign to increase awareness but asked what more the Council could do in future to improve. Zoe Wilkins said the Electoral Commission had just released their report on Voter ID and it noted that the take up of VACs was low. She suggested the message could be reinforced at subsequent elections through communications campaigns and putting information with poll cards. She also noted the new Government may want to look at the ID that could be used.

Councillor Victoria Brocklebank-Fowler congratulated the Elections team for running two elections this year. She said the report showed how much work the team did and how well it worked. She was particularly impressed that there had been a drop in the number of people turning up without valid ID between the two elections despite them only being six weeks apart.

Councillor Brocklebank-Fowler asked for clarification about why the funding from central government for elections was not ring fenced. Zoe Wilkins said the grant from central government had come to her service and would be used for elections work, but technically it could be used for other purposes.

Councillor Rory Vaughan asked how the Council was doing reaching EU voters regarding the changes highlighted in the report. Zoe Wilkins said the law stated there were two paths for EU nationals. The first group were those who were eligible to vote or had registered to vote before December 2020 and they would receive a letter explaining the changes and that they didn't need to take any further action to keep their right to vote. The second group would be informed that they needed to respond to the Council to confirm their right to vote via their right to remain in the UK. To assist with this the Council was doing additional communications and working with local groups like the Polish Social and Cultural Association, following guidance from the Electoral Commission. Councillor Vaughan said he was interested in how successful the campaign would be.

Councillor Vaughan asked how the data on how many people were initially turned away but then returned to vote was recorded – and what advice those voters were given on the day. Zoe Wilkins explained that all polling stations had a form from the Electoral Commission to record anyone who either had no ID or the wrong kind of ID, and whether they returned later. Polling station teams were given a list of acceptable ID that they could give to voters and they all had a visual display in the station showing valid forms of ID. All poll clerks and presiding officers were trained on that process.

Councillor Vaughan noted that people could apply for a postal vote online and asked how signatures were recorded. Zoe Wilkins explained that there was a national portal to apply for postal votes and users were prompted to take a photo of their signature with their phone and then upload the image. For people who found that difficult they could apply without a signature and the Elections team would follow up with them and ask them to send in a signature by post.

Councillor Nikos Souslous noted that the postal voting application now required a national insurance number and asked if officers had data on how many were refused for not having one. Zoe Wilkins clarified that only the application required a national insurance number, not the postal vote itself. If the application failed for that reasons the Elections team would write and ask for proof of ID (i.e. passport) and if that failed, they would not receive a postal vote. She said she could provide data on how many people were refused a postal vote following the meeting.

ACTION: Zoe Wilkins

Councillor Souslous asked how EU residents would register to vote in future as they became eligible. Zoe Wilkins said they would register to vote in the usual way – the application process would ask for their nationality and the relevant right to vote information.

Councillor Souslous asked about the customer experience for electoral services. Zoe Wilkins said the service used the corporate contact centre for telephone calls, a dedicated email inbox, and several national online portals that fed into the service from central government.

Councillor Souslous noted that the service had previously spoken about the possibility of new voters being automatically registered and asked if any progress had been made in that area. Zoe Wilkins said she was aware of discussions within government but did not expect any significant changes within the next few years.

Councillor Souslous asked what other work was upcoming for Electoral Services. Zoe Wilkins said the Polling Districts and Places Review would be going to Full Council in January, the team had started the annual canvas, and they were planning for the next borough elections.

Councillor Natalia Perez asked what the most effective methods had been to raise awareness of the Voter ID changes ahead of the general election. Zoe Wilkins felt the information booklet that was sent out with poll card was the most effective as it

reached all voters, but she wanted to speak to residents directly and ask them for feedback to improve for next time.

Councillor Jacolyn Daly asked if the rule changes had driven changes in voter behaviour – i.e. did the numbers of proxy and postal voters increase vs in-person voting. Zoe Wilkins said it was difficult to answer based on the data collected and needed more research. She offered to provide the relevant statistics to members.

ACTION: Zoe Wilkins

The Chair thanked officers for the report and noted the Elections team had taken many of the Board’s concerns and suggestions into consideration. She thanked everyone involved for delivering successful elections.

RESOLVED

1. That the Policy and Oversight Board noted and commented on the report.

6. WORK PROGRAMME

The Chair highlighted the ‘Greening the Grey’ workshop held on 5 September and noted that it would come to the Board to develop policy in this area.

RESOLVED

1. The Board noted the draft work programme for 2024.

7. DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

The following dates of future meetings were noted:

- 25 November 2024
- 5 February 2025
- 6 May 2025

Meeting started: 7.00 pm
Meeting ended: 8.53 pm

Chair

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