

London Borough of Hammersmith & Fulham

Policy and Oversight Board Minutes



Monday 24 April 2023

PRESENT

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

Officers

Sukvinder Kalsi (Director of Finance)
Matthew Sales (Assistant Director, Programmes, Assurance and Analytics)
Mary Lamont (Assistant Director, People & Talent)
Joanna Howe (Business Intelligence Manager)
David Abbott (Head of Governance)

Guests

Asiya Mohamud (Resourcing and Data Analyst)
Olivia Finlay (Learning and Talent Advisor)

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

There were no apologies for absence.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS

There were no declarations of interest.

3. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the meeting held on 24 January 2023 were agreed as an accurate record.

4. OUR COMMITMENT TO INCLUSIVE RECRUITMENT, INTERNAL DEVELOPMENT AND PROGRESSION AND RETENTION OF KEY SKILLS

Mary Lamont (Assistant Director, People & Talent) introduced the report which provided an update on the Council's commitment to embedding an inclusive culture in terms of recruitment, internal development, progression and retention of key skills.

Asiya Mohamud (Resourcing and Data Analyst) and Olivia Finlay (Learning and Talent Advisor) addressed the meeting to speak about their experiences of the Council's apprenticeship programme.

The Chair noted that questions on staffing came up at the last meeting and so it was useful to explore the current situation and hear about the challenges around recruitment and retention. She said the Council wanted to ensure it had a healthy culture to get best from staff, in service of residents.

Councillor Helen Rowbottom asked how the Council planned to bring in new staff and leaders for the coming decades. Mary Lamont said H&F was continuously developing innovative options and solutions around attraction and retention in a competitive marketplace and that the Council was working with many partners including London Councils to promote the exciting, diverse range of services the Council offered. She noted that some of the best ambassadors for the Council were apprentices like Asiya and Olivia.

Councillor Rowbottom asked how the Council was approaching recruitment for hard to fill posts and if it was working with educational institutions. Mary Lamont said the Council was collaborating with local education establishments and universities to create targeted campaigns for hard to fill roles.

Councillor Jacolyn Daly asked if the embedding of the Get Ahead programme and other culture change initiatives was equal across all departments. Mary Lamont said that officers were continuously analysing data to understand if and where there may be discrepancies and the Council was progressing actions to promote and ensure a fair and equitable offer across the board.

Councillor Rory Vaughan asked what the equalities, diversity and inclusion data looked like at different pay scales and at senior management level. Mary Lamont advised that the Council had recently published its pay gap reports which include gender, ethnicity and disability. The Council's race equality leads had also been speaking to staff about their experiences. She said, cumulatively the Council was doing well, but there were still gaps at some levels and the action plan that sits behind the pay gap report would help the Council to reduce those gaps going forward.

Councillor Vaughan asked if working from home had impacted retention rates. Mary Lamont said staff turnover went down to 10.6 percent during Covid, then in the following period it rose to 15.8 percent, however since then it had settled back to 11.3 percent. The Council's approach to hybrid working appeared to have had a positive impact on retention rates.

Councillor Natalia Perez asked for more information about the accreditations, mentioned on page 18 of the agenda pack, that promoted inclusive recruitment and retention strategies. Mary Lamont said the Council was selective about which charters and accreditations it signed up to and that there were many benefits for participating through shared practice, networking, and learning opportunities. She gave the example of the Race at Work charter, which led to the Council developing its successful race equality groups.

Councillor Perez noted she welcomed the new initiatives around menopause awareness.

Councillor Perez asked if contractors and other third parties the Council worked with were a part of this work and other initiatives like the London Living Wage. Mary Lamont said all contractors were signed up to the London Living Wage. The People and Talent team also worked closely with Procurement and Economic Development colleagues on social value and other commitments, for example Pertemps was a gold armed forces covenant member.

Councillor Victoria Brocklebank-Fowler, in reference to page 26, noted that the number of staff aged between 50-64 was down from November 2020. She expressed concern that the Council was potentially losing a lot of institutional knowledge. Mary Lamont agreed that it was important to retain knowledge and skills. She noted that the Council was encouraging recruitment and retention of older staff and that the Council had recently signed up to the Age Friendly Employer pledge.

Councillor Brocklebank-Fowler asked officers to confirm that, when interviewing, candidates were chosen based entirely on their qualifications and character – and not positive discrimination. Mary Lamont said the Council did not apply positive discrimination when recruiting. Recruitment was based on knowledge, skills, experience and attitude. The Council had robust recruitment processes and mandatory training for hiring managers to ensure recruitment is inclusive.

Councillor Nicole Trehy asked about the Council's stance on bullying in the workplace. Mary Lamont said the Council did not tolerate bullying in any form and there were various confidential routes available to staff to raise concerns.

Councillor Nikos Souslous asked if the Council captured any socio-economic data about prospective candidates. Matthew Sales said the Council didn't track that information.

The Chair asked if exit interviews were conducted with staff to determine their reasons for leaving and any gaps. The Chair also asked about pay gaps and whether women and minority staff were over-represented in frontline roles but not in senior management. Mary Lamont said all staff leaving the Council were offered the opportunity of an exit interview, but that it mandated and take up tended to be low. Options were being considered to encourage greater take-up. Regarding pay gap reporting, she said new datasets were available at pay band level broken down by gender, ethnicity, and disability. The Chair asked if there was data available on hard-to-fill posts. Mary Lamont said there was and that she would share the latest information.

ACTION: Mary Lamont

A resident commented that the data showed the Council appeared to be doing well representing communities it served, but some groups seemed to be over-represented.

Councillor Rowan Ree (Cabinet Member for Finance and Reform) addressed the Board and spoke about the importance of the Council recruiting and retaining the best people to ensure better services for residents. He also highlighted the importance of having a diverse and inclusive workforce, to avoid groupthink and be better able to spot risks and opportunities.

The Chair asked how the Council monitored apprenticeship programmes and good employment practices with its contractors. Mary Lamont said they worked closely with Economic Development colleagues and noted they would be coming to a future meeting with more information on the Council's Industrial Strategy.

The Chair thanked officers and members for their contributions and noted the following actions:

- The Board requested data on hard-to-fill posts.
- The Board requested an update on the workforce figures and statistics next year.
- The Board asked that the strategy for retaining older workers be circulated to members.

RESOLVED

1. That the Board noted the progress made and plans going forward.

5. LOOKING BACK ON THE WORK OF THE BOARD IN 2022/23

Matthew Sales (Assistant Director, Programmes, Assurance and Analytics) presented the report which looked back at the achievements of the Board in 2022/23 and looked ahead to 2023/24. He highlighted the major items that the Board has considered – supporting the co-production and development of the Council's emerging Digital Inclusion Strategy and the Council's response to the Cost-of-Living Crisis.

The Chair noted that the work of the Board had a lot of influence on the cost-of-living response and its input on the Council's digital inclusion strategy had been significant.

The Board approved its terms of reference for the forthcoming municipal year.

Members felt it had been valuable to invite experts to the meetings to look at issues in greater depth and wanted to continue that approach at future meetings.

RESOLVED

1. That the Board noted and commented on the report, including any key strategic issues within its remit to programme for consideration in 2023/24.
2. That the Board approved its Terms of Reference for the forthcoming municipal year.

6. 2021 CENSUS BRIEFING

Joanna Howe (Business Intelligence Manager) presented the report which provided a summary of headlines from the Census 2021 first release of topic data. It also considers emerging key trends and findings for the Council. The report sets out the plans for the further analysis and reporting of the Census as more data is released through 2023, including developing new ward profiles and a borough profile.

The Chair asked members to think about what information would be useful for ward councillors to have included in the ward profiles.

The Chair asked if the Council's Business Intelligence team wove in data from other sources. Joanna Howe said they brought together a number of data sets to provide richer insights into our communities. She gave the example of indices of multiple deprivation which pulled from multiple sources. She noted that census data was used across the Council, matching data sets to get best value.

Councillor Jacolyn Daly asked if officers had faith in the census figures, given that responses were gathered during a Covid pandemic lockdown, and what the implications were if they didn't. Matthew Sales said officers believed the census accurately reflected the situation at the time, but it was not a true and accurate picture of the current population of the borough due to the unique timing of the census. Officers were working with other boroughs and making representations to Government about it.

Councillor Daly said she expected some groups like students to be under-represented. She had also read reports that the number of empty homes in the borough had tripled and asked for more information on that.

Joanna Howe explained that it was challenging to account for unoccupied homes but further analysis of data showed around 2,000 second homes in the borough, 1,000 homes that were genuinely empty, 3,000 exempt dwellings from Council Tax (meaning the owner was in prison or ill etc.) and 1,300 were short term lets to residents not born in UK, which left around 4,300 properties where the status wasn't known. The pandemic led to a number of people moving and there was also a change to the total number of houses in borough during that period. She noted that the Office of National Statistics (ONS) would be releasing mid-year estimates in September and officers would understand the picture more clearly next year.

Councillor Daly said she would be interested to see numbers of overseas owners and the impact of Airbnb on available homes.

Referring to Councillor Daly's earlier point about consequences, Councillor Rowan Ree (Cabinet Member for Finance and Reform) said they were significant because funding could depend on census figures. Many people had moved away during lockdown to be with their families and students moved out of the borough. He said the Council was lobbying Government with other boroughs to ensure they took that into account and residents didn't lose out.

Councillor Nikos Souslous noted that ward boundaries had changed recently and asked how accurate the comparisons across time were given the changes. Jo Howe explained the data was remapped to the new ward boundaries so it would be accurate.

Councillor Souslous asked when the Council would receive more indices of multiple deprivation data. Joanna Howe said it was coming in mid-August and the mid-year estimate based on the census was coming in September.

Councillor Natalia Perez asked if officers knew which wards the majority of the 14,500 'missing' residents were from and if there were concerns about the impact on social infrastructure in those wards. She also noted that some communities felt 'invisible' due to the lack of choices on the census forms (e.g. the Latin American community). She asked if the Council had the means to reach out to those communities.

Joanna Howe said they only knew the changes by ward. The challenge was understanding genuine change versus the expectations of return. Some factors gave indications, for example West Kensington saw the biggest decreases in population but has the highest rate of private renters so there was likely to be undercounting in that ward. Matthew Sales said in terms of hidden communities, officers did a lot of work with the ONS in advance of the census. There were community advisors in certain communities to encourage people to respond. The Council also had a dedicated community engagement team to work with different communities.

Councillor Rory Vaughan noted the data showed the borough's residents to be in good health and asked what other data correlated with that and what was driving it. Joanna Howe said it would be possible to drill down into this area when the more detailed data arrived later in the year. Matthew Sales added that health data was self-reported, but it would be looked at in context of other data like the indices of multiple deprivation. Councillor Vaughan said he would be interested in a breakdown and any lessons about what the drivers of good health are.

Councillor Victoria Brocklebank-Fowler noted the decrease in young primary school children had been happening for some time, leading to a number of vacant school places which impacted on their funding.

Councillor Daly asked if officers had information on how many people were secure social tenants, how many were in private accommodation, how many were using housing benefit to pay private rents etc. Joanna Howe said it was possible to provide information on numbers of residents in receipt of housing benefit by ward.

ACTION: Joanna Howe

Councillor Perez asked if the data showed access to health provision and social care provision. Joanna Howe said officers could look into that with colleagues in Adult Social Care.

ACTION: Joanna Howe

The Chair said it would be good to have feedback on what was possible with the data available. She also encouraged the PAC Chairs to think about what information would be interesting for their committees to look at in more detail.

Councillor Ree highlighted the importance of the data to help the Council understand its residents and target services more effectively. He said data was more and more important to all our lives, and ensuring the Council was well placed to take advantage of that was one of his priorities. He thanked Matthew Sales, Joanna Howe and the rest of the Business Intelligence team.

RESOLVED

1. That the Board noted the report and supporting Appendix 1 that included the emerging key trends and findings for the Council.
2. That the Board noted the proposed plans for analysis of Census 21 data and offered suggestions of areas for more detailed analysis as part of these plans.
3. That the Board noted and commented on the proposal for interactive ward profiles.

7. POLICY AND ACCOUNTABILITY COMMITTEES' UPDATE REPORT

Members received the report that outlined the areas of work and reports considered by each of the Council's six Policy and Accountability Committees, from January 2023 to March 2023.

The Chair highlighted the following issues for future meetings:

- Co-production – taking a strategic view
- Intergenerational working – September meeting

Councillor Nikos Souslous noted that plans were being made for a special meeting of the Social Inclusion and Community Safety PAC in July to discuss the Baroness Casey Review of the Metropolitan Police. The intention was to invite residents and representatives of community groups to give their views. He also invited the other PAC Chairs to attend.

RESOLVED

1. That the Board noted the updates of the Policy and Accountability Committees and discussed any areas for future review or collaboration.

8. DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

The Board noted the following dates of future meetings:

- 20 June 2023
- 11 Sep 2023
- 11 Dec 2023
- 23 Jan 2024
- 29 Apr 2024

Meeting started: 7.02 pm
Meeting ended: 9.01 pm

Chair

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