

# Economic Regeneration, Housing and the Arts Policy and Accountability Committee Minutes

Tuesday 5 July 2016

## **PRESENT**

**Committee members:** Councillors Daryl Brown, Adam Connell, Alan De'Ath (Chair), Lucy Ivimy and Harry Phibbs

**Other Councillors:** Ben Coleman, Wesley Harcourt and Lisa Homan

**Officers:** Mike Clarke, Daniel Miller, Nilavra Mukerji and Helen Worwood

## **7. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Councillor Lucy Ivimy had sent her apologies for lateness.

Councillor Sue Fennimore, Cabinet Member for Social Inclusion, had sent her apologies for not being at the meeting owing to other commitments.

## **8. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest.

## **9. MINUTES**

The minutes of the meeting held on 7 June were agreed to be accurate.

## **10. OPEN DOORS: ENSURING A THRIVING LIBRARY SERVICE IN HAMMERSMITH & FULHAM**

Mike Clarke, Director of Libraries and Archives, explained that the council was determined to maintain its Library service, and keep all libraries open.

The council was looking for ways to ensure that the service remained sustainable and to broaden the appeal of libraries. To make libraries more financially sustainable further commercial opportunities were being sought, as well as partnerships with businesses and other organisations. Mr Clarke explained that the council's libraries had attracted more visitors and borrowers over the past year, but that the council wanted to encourage even more people to use libraries. He noted that less than half of visitors to libraries now borrowed a book, and that e-books and other digital resources had become popular.

Councillor Harcourt, Cabinet Member for Environment, Transport and Residents Services, said that he knew discussions about libraries could become emotive; he explained that the council would not be closing any libraries, or reducing their opening hours. He said that the administration's manifesto had included a commitment to modernise and widen the appeal of the borough's libraries and that this meeting was the first stage in doing that. Councillor Harcourt stressed that he and officers really wanted to hear residents views on what could and should be done to make libraries better and more sustainable and noted that whilst officers had included some of their ideas in the report to get the discussion going, these were only ideas and not the council's policy.

The Chair asked why the council was having to look at ideas to bring in more revenue. Councillor Harcourt explained that the council was facing a £70 million reduction in its funding from central government and in its efforts to mitigate the impact of these funding cuts the administration was trying to bring in more money in different ways.

A resident asked whether using volunteers might reduce the quality of service as they would not, she presumed, be qualified librarians. Mike Clarke explained that over 100 volunteers were already used in libraries and that they were not there to replace qualified librarians, rather they were used to help with specific tasks or projects and they were given appropriate training for their roles.

Gwen Cook, a local resident, explained that she was concerned that about the use of too many volunteers, saying that it was important to have sufficient qualified librarians to ensure that the service operated correctly. A resident explained that they volunteered with the archives service and felt that those volunteers she had met were providing a good service and doing something they enjoyed. She raised concerns however about school pupils using libraries inappropriately around exam times.

A resident, who had formerly been a member of staff at Westminster Reference Library, explained that they had previously coordinated volunteers for the library and that the quality of person who volunteered was usually very high; adequate training and support for volunteers was however essential to get the most out of volunteers. Francis Serjeant, Reference Librarian, explained that his experience of volunteers was that they could be unreliable and that it was difficult to advertise a service if volunteers were due to provide it as they could pull out at short notice. A resident felt that the council could

consider apprenticeships and internships as well as just volunteering schemes. Mike Clarke said that using volunteers needed careful management and proper support but felt that the value they could add to the service was significant.

Karen Blackwell, Libraries Assistant, noted that the report included reference to an increase in the number of volunteers causing staffing costs to reduce. She asked whether the council intended to make libraries staff redundant. Councillor Harcourt explained that there was no plan to make staff redundant; he had not discussed compulsory redundancies with officers and would not want to. He thought that the £100,000 figure referred to in the report referred to added value which would be brought by additional volunteers.

A resident suggested that libraries could work with charity shops to source books as they regularly received donations direct from publishers. Another resident suggested that the public could be asked to donate books. Richard Grant, manager of Fulham Library, explained that it was difficult to accept books from the public as they had to be inspected for quality and then fitted with a jacket and tagged. A resident said that having a wide ranging stock of books was very important. Mike Clarke thanked said that the stock at Hammersmith and Fulham's libraries had been improved significantly over the past few years and agreed to look into how donations could be accepted.

A children's author, who was also a local resident, said that she felt authors could do more to promote the borough's libraries. Mike Clarke said that the service would be very grateful of any assistance authors could give them; he also explained that in order to get young people to visit libraries the council had set up an automatic-enrolment scheme for pupils at schools across the borough. A resident suggested that this could be expanded to the adult learning service as well.

Ros O'Connell, a local resident, suggested that libraries could offer reading to pets sessions which were thought to develop literacy and build a reader's confidence. She also raised issues with the doors at Hammersmith Library making disabled access difficult. Mike Clarke agreed to look into the accessibility issue at Hammersmith Library.

A resident asked whether developers could be asked to help pay for libraries. Councillor Coleman said that developers contributed to the council through S.106 and the Community Infrastructure Levy, however, other ideas were also needed. A member of staff said that libraries ought to take card payments in order to boost revenues; Mike Clarke explained that this was already in progress. A number of residents said that they thought the co-working hubs and business facilities seemed like a good idea. A resident felt that introducing coffee carts might be a counterproductive initiative as more cleaners would be required to tidy up after customers. Karen Blackwell said that the service needed to improve its advertising for existing commercial activities, such as letting venues for weddings. Councillor Coleman agreed and said that the business case for a larger advertising budget was currently being considered as part of the smarter budgeting process.

Some library users said that they were concerned about how the appeal of libraries might be broadened; they felt that there were some activities, such as singing groups, which were disruptive to those wanting to read books, and that these needed to be planned well, for example using different rooms for noisier activities. A resident suggested that discussion groups on topical issues could be set up.

A resident noted that a trust for libraries had been suggested. He said that it was important that any trust included library users and library staff but would also need to be publicly accountable for its decisions. Councillor Coleman explained that there were financial advantages to running libraries through a trust and said that it was important that the community could shape the libraries service. Councillor Harcourt added that a trust model would also limit the ability of future administrations to make changes to the service which residents didn't want. Councillor Phibbs asked why an established not for profit organisation was not being considered. Councillor Harcourt explained that this would not give the necessary level of control to residents.

A resident suggested that access to the National Archives and the City of London Archive could be given through the borough's libraries. Mike Clarke said that this might not be practical as it depended on other organisations hanging their practices. Councillor Coleman said however that the borough had a very good archive itself and that this could be used to bring in commercial revenue, for example, by selling copies of interesting pictures and documents. A resident asked whether artwork from the archives could be displayed in the council's libraries. Councillor Coleman agreed that this was a good idea and explained that it would be good also to see contemporary local artists work in libraries as well.

A resident asked whether there were cuts to the library service planned. Mike Clarke explained that the council did not set percentages by which budgets would be cut, but used a process called smarter budgeting which tied funding to outcomes. He said however that the libraries service would need to reduce its spending, which was currently around £3 million and bring in more revenue, which was currently about £100,000, in order to stay sustainable and avoid reductions to service levels. He agreed to provide details of the budget as an appendix to the minutes.

Councillor Phibbs asked whether there had been any reduction in the number of library staff over the past two years. Mike Clarke explained that there had been no cuts to the council's library service in the last two years.

Councillor Phibbs asked whether more volunteers could be used to increase opening hours. Mike Clarke explained that this would be difficult as staff would be needed as well as volunteers; he said however that the service was looking at the pattern of opening hours to ensure libraries were open when residents wanted to visit. Councillor Phibbs asked whether greater use of school libraries could be made, for example by allowing residents to collect book from them and adding their stock to the council's database. James Humphrey, Librarian at St Thomas More Language College said that this might have an impact on the availability of books for staff and students. A

resident explained that Hurlingham Academy had made its library available to the public, but that one had to sign in before getting into the school; priority was also given to students so it was not always possible to use all of the services offered. The Chair said that he didn't think most schools had library collections which would be of interest to residents as they were often narrowly focussed on the school's curriculum.

Councillor Connell asked how the proposed 'Read, Learn and Connect' vision related to the digital age. Mike Clarke explained that digital formats were available, and great IT facilities, including computer tuition, were available at libraries. The vision included this connection to digital services, but reading printed material was still very important to many people and this was reflected in the document.

Councillor Harcourt thanked residents for their time and engagement in the meeting. He explained that councillors and officers would go away and consider what they had said and try to turn these into a viable strategy; he stressed however that no decisions would be taken on significant changes until residents had been consulted again.

#### **11. UPDATE ON THE RESIDENT INVOLVEMENT STRUCTURE AND COMMUNICATIONS WITH RESIDENTS**

Councillor Daryl Brown left the meeting prior to the consideration of this item.

Councillor Homan explained that when she had become Cabinet Member for Housing in 2014 she had attended a borough housing forum and the meeting had been dominated by people concerned about their housing partly because of the previous administration's approach to social housing and partly because they were not being involved in housing services. She felt that the council had made significant progress in the last two years to give residents the opportunity to get involved and shape how services were delivered.

Daniel Miller, Service Improvement & Resident Involvement Manager, explained that the emphasis of his team's work was now to put residents at the heart of decision making. The team had been expanded from 3 to 7 officers to allow them to do this; and his team now supported the Borough Housing Forum, Housing Representatives Forum, Sheltered Housing Forum, Leasehold Forums, Repairs Working Group, Communications Group, Investment Group, Inclusion Group, Reading Group, Caretaking Working Group and Residents' Conference Planning Group. A new Resident Involvement Strategy had been developed with residents which aimed to:

- 1) Place greater control and influence at the hands of our residents, making us more accountable for the housing services they receive.
- 2) Deliver 'More Involvement, Better Involvement' by working with residents to identify and break down barriers to engagement.
- 3) Promote social inclusion and support thriving and vibrant communities.

Councillor Connell asked how effective the service was at engaging new residents. Daniel Miller explained that over 150 people were directly involved in at least one of the groups previously mentioned or through their

membership of a Tenants & Residents Association (TRA). At the residents conference a further 26 people had expressed an interest in getting involved in some way. These people would all be contacted by his team and officers would discuss with them how they might like to get involved; the process for contacting residents had been designed with the help of the active service improvement groups. Daniel Miller said that he was not complacent however, and explained that his team was trying to get lots more residents involved; one idea was to promote opportunities for giving instant feedback through 'Rant and Rave' which is being trialled by the Housing Department and repairs contract, Mitie.

John Ryan, Chair of the Investment Group agreed that more residents were needed to add to the range of experience and to reduce the workload of some of the more engaged residents. He felt that more training for those getting involved was important to retaining residents and to getting the most from them. Nilavra Mukerji explained that historically this training had been left to other volunteers, particularly Chairs, to organise, and agreed that this was not ideal. He said that officers planned to develop an induction programme for residents.

A resident said that some of the Tenants' and Residents' Associations (TRAs) in the borough were not as effective as they should be, with some not engaging well with either the council or the residents in the area that they represent. A resident also said that there was also a problem with the representation of those living in properties which were not on housing estates. He said that clustering these properties together to form a viable association might be a solution, but felt that a lot of residents were not currently being represented. Cllr Lisa Homan said that she agreed that TRAs should engage with their residents and the council, however, she noted that they were run by volunteers and that some chose to use their time to promote community activities on estates rather than help the council with its engagement work; she felt that there was a balance to be struck. She also felt that officers could improve their communications to promote meetings to TRA representatives more and explain their importance better. Councillor Homan said that knew that there was a particular difficulty with engaging those living in street properties. Daniel Miller explained that his team offered support to TRAs which wanted to engage with the council more.

John Ryan said that the Investment Group had recently carried out a tour of the borough and directly engaged with residents which had given them very useful insights into what residents thought. He felt that more direct engagement with residents, by residents, would be a worthwhile exercise.

Nigel Hensman, a local resident, asked what relationship existed between TRAs, community associations and residents associations that consisted of residents who do not live in council housing. Councillor Homan explained that a large amount of TRA work was focussed on issues related to council housing, however, she was keen to see all residents in an area work together for the benefit of their community. Ros O'Connell, Chair of the Repairs Working Group, said that this already happened in some areas, and that she felt it ought to be encouraged.

A resident explained that tenants often got together because of problems which affected all of them; he felt that the council ought to offer such groups of residents easier ways of resolving their problems as they were often left frustrated by the council's bureaucracy. The Chair suggested that ward councillors could be invited to attend such meetings. Ros O'Connell said that during a visit to Croydon Council Housing they had explained that they had an officer whose main role was to champion resident concerns and priority areas who could ensure that groups of residents got the responses they needed and suggested that a senior officer could be given that role in the LBHF Housing Department. Gwen Cook asked whether there would be an overlap with the work of the InTouch team which managed complaints. Councillor Homan explained that the InTouch team was currently being reviewed to make it more effective, and that she would try to engage residents in that; she felt that there might be a role for a champion, but that it needed more consideration. Nilavra Mukerji agreed to look into the idea with colleagues.

Adrian Van Zyl presented an update on the newly formed Inclusion Group. He explained that the Inclusion Group believed that having an open and accessible platform for all residents was needed. This platform would allow residents to achieve many possibilities and create opportunities. The group believed that the platform would make it possible for talents to be shared and to involve everyone who could make a contribution – the council, other active community groups, charities, youth groups, and businesses including contractors working for the council. The Inclusion Group had identified the following main action tasks for consideration, although these might be added to:

- Tackling social exclusion
- Equality of opportunities for council housing residents
- Digital inclusion
- Financial support and inclusion
- Access to services

Anthony Wood, Chair of the Communications Group, explained that the group had been busy redesigning parts of the council's website and developing the new resident involvement packs. The group now intended to hold a series of meetings with officers to ask them to outline their communications strategy, starting with the Mitie repairs service. He explained that the aim of this exercise was to help officers learn how to communicate with residents better.

Councillor Phibbs said he was pleased that so many residents were involved in improving services, although he felt that the work residents did to improve their own communities and estates was also of great value. He was concerned that there were less active TRAs in the borough and that area housing forums, which he thought had been very useful, were no longer held. Councillor Phibbs noted that not all TRA halls were well used and said that he felt the council ought to be doing more to promote their use. He asked whether officers could assist with paperwork and to get more bookings. Nilavra Mukerji said that officers were working with TRAs to improve the use of tenants halls. A new Community Facilities Officer would be joining the council and part of their role would be to give support to TRAs; it was

important by residents, however, that TRAs kept control of their halls. Ros O'Connell felt that the current administration's approach to TRA halls was good; she remembered that previous administrations had dictated how halls could be used and had locked some residents out of their halls.

The Chair thanked officers and residents for their work, and all present for their contribution to an interesting debate.

## **12. DATE OF THE NEXT MEETING AND WORK PROGRAMME**

The Chair reminded the committee that the next meeting would be held at the Clem Attlee Residents Hall, on 6 September starting at 6pm. The meeting would be focussed on the Older Person's Housing Strategy; he asked that if residents knew sheltered accommodation residents they let them know about the meeting. If older residents who particularly wanted to attend the meeting would struggle to travel to the venue they were asked to contact the Chair.

Councillor Phibbs explained that he had asked for an item on Trees on Council Estates to be brought to the PAC as there were issues with their replacement. The Chair explained that he had thought this too narrow a topic to consider alone, but said that he had asked for an item on 'Greening our Estates' which would cover the problems Councillor Phibbs had raised. This was scheduled to be considered at one of the first few meetings in 2017.

Meeting started: 7.00 pm

Meeting ended: 9.50 pm

Chair .....

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