

WEST HAM CLP WOMEN'S FORUM

Every Women Matters
A contribution to Newham Labour Party
Local Election Manifesto 2014

Minutes of meeting held with Sir Robin Wales, Mayor of Newham

Tuesday 25th February 2014

1. Welcome and Introductions

Seyi Akiwowo, West Ham CLP Women's Officer and Chair of the Women's Forum, welcomed members and Sir Robin Wales (SRW) to the meeting, and set out the following:

- The meeting was a result of a consultation undertaken by the Forum earlier in the year, focusing on women members contribution to the Newham Labour Party manifesto presently being drafted in advance of the local elections on 22nd May 2014;
- The consultation focused on key policy areas that required further examination and assessment to ensure that Newham Council's Resilience Agenda (which would frame the Newham Labour Party Local Election manifesto) benefits the full diversity of women in Newham over the coming four year period;
- That the existing Resilience Agenda framed the consultation parameters as did the recognition of the impending budget constraints that Newham Council faced from FY 2015/16 onwards;
- That ideas and recommendations stemming from the consultation were summarised in a paper that would be submitted to the Mayor following the consultation meeting under the strap line 'Every Woman Matters';
- The paper highlighted the following policy areas as being a priority for the Forum:
 - Employment, skills & training, including English as a Second Language;
 - Violence against Women (incl. Domestic Violence and Sex workers);
 - Health Inequalities;
 - Housing and homelessness;
 - Community Hubs;
 - Female representation in Newham Council (political and officer levels);
 - Equality Impact Assessments to achieve progress on gender equality.
- The outcomes of the consultation presented a valuable opportunity to work with the Mayor and council, alongside East Ham CLP Women's Group and stakeholders.

Julianne Marriot, Vice-Chair of West Ham CLP and Forum member, set out some key top-line statistics relating to women in Newham - including those highlighting how women were less economically active.

SWR responded by saying that economic inactivity rates among women in Newham required further research and examination in order to understand the gender disparity in the labour market as there was insufficient understanding of why this was the case.

2. Economic Resilience

Forum members raised issues about the quality of skills training provision for women, specifically in relation to women where proficiency in English language was a major barrier to the labour market. It was emphasised how these were impediments to positive economic resilience outcomes for women in Newham, especially women from black and minority ethnic communities (BME). Specific concerns centred on long waiting lists for English as a Second Language (ESOL) classes - with many women not having the opportunities to register. It was pointed out that a significant percentage of these women had valuable labour market skills but due to their weaknesses in English language proficiency, these skills were not being used. It was suggested that this was a significant barrier to entry into the labour market, and one of the main reasons for economic inactivity, among a significant grouping of women in Newham. Some Forum members pointed to good practise model used by East London Textiles group - the 'Knit and Natter' initiative, where English provision was provided through voluntary activities that encouraged those with weak English proficiency to interact with English speakers through a social activity.

SWR responded by agreeing that this was an important area. He pointed to the impact of central government cuts to ESOL provision and explained Newham policy: namely ESOL was free for women who have been in the UK for two years; they were able to access support from Newham Workplace to access employment opportunities; and they could also access schemes like 'Chatterbox'.

He advised that expansion of ESOL classes would not be financially feasible, as would require more qualified teachers and this was a high cost. However, ESOL could be delivered by the voluntary sector through clubs and associated community groups in the form of voluntary (free) activities.

Referring to the planned Community Hubs that would be rolled out across Newham, **SRW** suggested that such activities could be coordinated through the Hub model. However he said that this would only work if a concerted volunteer effort to support the delivery of English language provision was initiated. He also pointed out that ultimately it is Community Hubs that would decide on their own localised priorities.

He also emphasised that Newham Workplace and Skillsplace, had a priority to get people into work within a short time-frame. However, both services adopt a personalised approach to getting people back into work. Consequently, they would consider issues relating to English proficiency and sign-post women to ESOL classes plus consider issues such as how it will affect their benefits and whether they need childcare.

With regards to childcare, **SRW** referred to evidence which suggests that women presenting themselves at Newham Workplace for even the lowest paid jobs don't normally say childcare is a problem. However, there is little understanding as to why this may be the case (for instance, they may already have informal provision). Regardless, **SRW** is committed to increasing the amount of childcare available in

Newham, as research shows that this is beneficial though it is unlikely to be a Newham Labour Party Manifesto commitment.

Forum members suggested that deploying the Community Hubs as a mechanism to expand ESOL provision in Newham (through voluntary activities), would require a Newham-wide policy commitment that not only informs Community Hub delivery but also sets a policy aspiration over the coming period for Newham Council as well - especially given ESOL's role in increasing the economic resilience of women in Newham.

Forum members also suggested that one of the reasons why some women may not identify childcare as an issue in gaining employment, is because the jobs they undertake may be outside of the 'traditional' 8.00am - 6.00pm hours of work (a particular characteristic of low-wage jobs), so can cover childcare requirements in any case. However, that doesn't mean that childcare isn't an issue, as could be impeding their ability to get better paid jobs during 'normal working day' hours.

Some Forum members raised the issue of unemployed adults with dyslexia who will need to pay for the costs of their diagnosis, as it wasn't an impairment identified when they were children. As this presented a problem for such individuals who would need help in completing application forms, would Newham Workplace be able to fund the diagnosis costs or could this be funded from elsewhere (for instance, in the form of a loan)?

SWR advised that ESOL provision could be included in the delivery framework being developed for Community Hubs, and if Hubs were not addressing the issue, there would be action.

Additionally, he suggested that some Council owned services could be leveraged to help people gain employment. For instance, the Atherton Leisure Centre would include a cafe once building works completed. While the cafe may not achieve full profitability, as long as it achieved a balance it could be used as a mechanism to provide jobs for those for whom access into the labour market was particularly challenging - i.e. disabled people.

He also advised that Newham Workplace is already matching people to appropriate jobs which don't require reading skills.

Agreed actions:

- Recognition that English proficiency (ESOL) and skills were an important element of the economic resilience agenda. As such, Community Hubs to be encouraged to support the provision of ESOL through voluntary activities and this would be included in the Community Hubs delivery framework: **(SRW)**
- To explore the establishment of more 'into work' partnerships with businesses, but with a specific focus on women: **(SRW)**
- To assist in the development ESOL / English language provision approaches through Newham's planned Community Hubs model and inform the corresponding delivery framework: **(Forum)**
- Consider an awareness raising campaign aimed at women so that they understand and can access personalised help and support from Newham Workplace and Skillspace **(Forum)**

3. Individual Resilience

Forum members raised the importance of partnership working with local business (including new business investors to Newham such as Chinese developer ABP) to create job opportunities for women, especially in non-traditional industries and sectors. Additionally, Forum members suggested that more examination of Newham Workplace is required to ensure that it is sufficiently working for women in Newham.

SWR advised that the gender profile of those helped by Newham Workplace is roughly equal for both men and women, but would circulate figures to the Forum. He recognised the importance of increasing inward business investment into Newham, and to engage with them to create employment opportunities for Newham residents. He added that additionally, a challenge is finding employers. However, plans are underway to engage with Canary Wharf Group plc amongst others in this area. He recognises that girls in Newham are doing better at school, but are still not choosing sciences and other non-traditional subjects that could help lead to jobs in non-traditional sectors but unclear at what point can the Council influence that.

Additionally, the Newham policy and research team are currently undertaking research on skills development and employment in Newham. There is recognition that Newham's skills development offering is not great, despite recent investment in the new FE College, and that training needs to lead to positive employment outcomes for people in Newham. There also needs to be a complete review of Newham's Careers Service offering to young people and students.

Forum members noted the success of 'Every Child a reader' and whether this could be supplemented with an awareness raising campaign targeted at parents, e.g. 'Have you had your 15 minutes?' to encourage parents to engage in supporting their children with reading.

SRW advised the Forum, that presently there isn't a clear picture of the impact of Newham's procurement approach for services aimed at children. There are no plans to close down children's centres as research shows that children who attend children's centres do well at reception year (though no evidence as to whether this is causal or correlates to the provision). However, there may be a need to change how Children Centres are delivered.

Actions agreed:

- Newham Workplace statistics on gender characteristics of those helped into jobs to be provided: **(SRW)**
- An examination of how best to ensure employment opportunities for women in new inward investment developments in Newham: **(SRW)**
- The Forum to work with SRW to review how Newham Career Service is performing, as part of the Council's intended full review of career service provision in Newham. This would include a series of recommendations specific to women: **(Forum and SRW)**
- The Forum to consider and submit proposals for consideration around the future delivery of Newham Children's Centres: **(Forum)**

4. Community Resilience

Forum members raised the issue of domestic violence (DV) and what measures could be introduced, specifically aimed at developing pre-emptive measures for perpetrators (for instance, self-esteem and anger management classes).

SWR advised that the two cabinet leads, Cllr Unmesh Desai and Cllr Ian Corbett, were very focused on Newham's DV agenda, and would be open to trailing new approaches through pilots. If there is evidence that it can work then it should be submitted as a proposal.

Presently, as part of a raft of measures adopted in the response to DV, there is a focus on tackling alcohol. In effect, through tackling the selling of single canned alcoholic drinks, Newham has enforced a minimum pricing. Additionally, **SWR** advised that getting people into work reduces DV.

Forum members asked if there is a higher link between alcohol and DV in Newham compared to the London average; and whether any thinking had been given to averting any further homicide incidents (of which are relatively few in Newham) where the victims were very isolated women who didn't speak English. Forum members also pointed to Metropolitan Police statistics which showed that recorded incidents of DV doubled in Newham in 2013, and asked whether that is because it has increased or because there had been an increase in reporting. With regards to sexual assault (rape), the statistics highlighted 19 incidents of rape in Newham, which still appeared relatively low and pointed to under-reporting. This was an area that required more challenge by Newham Council in their discussions with Newham police. Forum members also raised concerns about the lack of data at ward level and that this was an area that Community Hubs should be taking action. Additionally, Forum members suggested that numerical targets for the police needed to be strengthened with qualitative targets such as 'How are you making it easier for women in Newham to report their experience of domestic violence'

SWR agreed that the police figures were questionable and seemed more weighted to an increase in recording incidents of DV and sexual assault. He also advised that there has been substantive work undertaken to encourage people to have more confidence in reporting incidents that they have experienced; and that the Metropolitan Police are taking DV more seriously. He pointed to the fact that a new Borough Commander has been appointed, and that this should see an enhancement in policing in the Borough.

Moreover, he advised that Newham Council won't be prepared to pay for approaches / work in this area that isn't effective. For instance, with regards to Newham's drug policy it is focused on people leading chaotic lifestyles in ways that onerously impact on others; not on those who manage to keep their lives stable. It points to an approach where money is not being spent above and beyond Newham workplace getting habitual and chaotic drug users into work.

Forum members raised concerns about gender and health inequalities, for instance with women not going to screening at early stages and then presenting very late. Moreover they pointed to screening facilities currently in Newham not being particularly hospitable, and that more public awareness needed to be done to increase rates of screening among women in Newham. Some Forum members suggested that linking a health public awareness campaigns at community events.

SWR indicated that more could be done in the area of health inequalities among women in Newham and recognised that the area of health was very challenging, with people and structures changing rapidly. He cited the example of how it took 18 months to establish how many children were born in the borough. While adult health and social care had seen improvements in recent years, it was important to tackle other areas of health. He added that equally important was the approach to getting people into work and getting them active, which would make them healthier.

Forum members raised the issue of increased representation of women in the Council and among officers in Newham. With the number of new Labour candidates who had been selected, and who will hopefully be elected alongside current female candidates, the Forum noted that there would be approximately 24 female councillors. Forum members stated that organisations made up of diverse groups led to better results, and that the number of women in the Council needed to be reflected in the Cabinet at proportionate levels. Additionally, Forum members advised that the scheduling of Council meetings need to take into account female councillors with childcare responsibilities, and that support should be made available for them. They also raised other approaches that could be adopted that would help support women in their Councillor roles, including mentoring, public speaking training

SWR advised that the Newham Labour Party had lost four good female councillors, but felt that the selection process would reflect a good intake of women councillors this year. He suggested that Community Hubs would be a great opportunity for women councillors to be involved at strategic level, as well as encouraging more women from the wider community. He pointed to the fact that a number of Community Lead Councillors are women and this provided them opportunities to gain more skills and experience to progress further. Additionally, he advised that he is planning to make the Labour Group separate from the Council as this will encourage debate and would encourage people to progress to Cabinet level as well.

Action Points:

- Any proposals submitted by the Forum to tackle DV will be consider for trialling: **(SRW)**
- The Forum to develop proposals to address DV (with clear evidence) for submission to SRW. This could cover a spectrum of DV scenarios / issues: **(Forum)**
- The Council's research team will be tasked with undertaking research on the issue of screening and gender health inequalities after it completed its works on skills: **(SRW)**
- The Forum will consult with health professionals about gender health inequalities and submit proposals to the Council as part of the research team's work in this area: **(Forum)**
- The Forum to design and develop a training programme for female councillors candidates, which could also be offered to other Labour women. The training programme would include public speaking: **(Forum)**

5. Conclusions

The Forum thanked SRW for attending the Forum meeting and reiterated that all the proposals expressed all had relevancy to the Council's Resilience agenda. Moreover the

Forum members stated that it was important for the manifesto to commit to addressing gender equality.

Action Points:

- The Forum will send an email to SRW formally thanking him for his attendance. This would be followed by the formal submission of the Forum's manifesto document: **(Forum)**
- Statistical information discussed during the meeting to be sent to the Forum: **(SRW)**
- The Forum to engage with East Ham CLP Women's Group to ensure that they are evolved in the implementation of plans going forward: **(Forum)**