

# London Borough of Barnet

## Change of governance arrangements - case study

### Background and Context

Barnet Council, located in North London, has a rich historical and cultural background that informs its governance. The borough is diverse, with a blend of socio-economic and demographic factors shaping its community. The former governance structure had been influenced by various legislative acts, including the Local Government Act 2000 and the Localism Act 2011.

In May 2022, Barnet experienced a significant political shift during the all-out elections, transitioning from Conservative to Labour control. This change ignited discussions within the Labour group about the efficacy of the existing governance system. The new Labour administration expressed a desire to transition to a Cabinet system to ensure speedy decision-making and clear accountable leadership, held to account by cross-party scrutiny arrangements.

### The Need for Change

The move to a Cabinet system was seen as a necessary evolution to drive improvement. The Committee system, while inclusive, often led to slower decision-making due to the number of committees and the frequency of the meetings. The Labour group believed that a Cabinet system would facilitate stronger and more visible leadership, with Cabinet Members taking active roles within their specific domains.

The change was also driven by a cultural shift within the Council. The Cabinet system was expected to enhance the role of Members by enabling them to drive the policy agenda and improve accountability for the decisions made. The change also sought to strengthen opportunities for public participation and to enable the Council to respond more effectively to issues of local importance.

This case study will explore the impact of this transition, examining how the new structure has influenced decision-making processes, accountability, and overall council performance.

### Challenges and opportunities

#### Challenges

The transition from a Committee system to a Cabinet system presented several key challenges for Barnet Council.

### ***Speed of Change***

A Council resolution was passed in July 2022 which sought to change governance arrangements the following May. A project commenced in late August 2002 and all workstreams had to be delivered within nine months, including: a complete re-write of the constitution; a team restructure; revisions to Members' allowances; the recruitment and appointment of co-opted and independent members; a series of briefings and training sessions with Members and officers; and engagement with a cross-party working group. Adopting a project management approach was essential to delivering the change within the timescales.

### ***Member and Officer Briefings and Training***

One of the foremost issues was ensuring that both Members and officers were adequately trained to understand what the change meant for them and how to navigate the new governance structure when it was introduced. This required delivering Member briefings and training sessions which was particularly challenging given the significant amount of induction training being delivered to Members after the 2022 election and the rolling Member training programme that was already in place.

Equipping both Members and officers with the necessary skills and knowledge to inform and influence the change and ensuring that the new system was effective was crucial; however, delivering training and briefings at the right level and at the right time both prior to and during implementation, and amongst business as usual, was challenging.

In relation to Members, CfGS attended briefings with the Labour and Conservative groups on the key features of the governance systems and training sessions were delivered in the lead up to and after the change on key scrutiny concepts.

In relation to officers, several briefing sessions were delivered to the senior management team and other key officers on the change of governance system.

### ***Designing Effective Scrutiny***

Developing an optimal scrutiny committee structure was a challenge – many councils have several committees, panels, or commissions to discharge their scrutiny arrangements; this can be inefficient and frustrate the scrutiny process and it was important for the new system to avoid replicating any issues from the previous Committee system. Barnet benchmarked committee structures to inform optimal arrangements.

Embedding pre-decision scrutiny was also a challenge. It is recognised good practice to enable scrutiny to have an input into significant decisions before Cabinet makes them, but there can be practical challenges in relation to identifying items for pre-scrutiny and the timing of meetings which need to be carefully managed.

### ***Team Structure***

To best support the new governance arrangements, the Governance Service was split into a Governance team and Scrutiny team. Managing a restructure and internal/ external recruitment whilst delivering the change project and supporting business as usual was challenging.

### ***Opportunities***

Despite these challenges, the transition to a Cabinet system also presented several opportunities for Barnet Council.

### ***New Members***

Following the 2022 local election, there was a large cohort of new Members (around 50%) at the time which allowed for a fresh perspective and an opportunity to embed good practice in scrutiny from the outset. This intake of new Members, coupled with proactive engagement, helped mitigate cultural resistance and fostered an environment more open to learning and adaptation. In addition, many of the Members had previous experience of working under the Cabinet model and could share this with new Members.

### ***Culture***

Moving to a new governance system helped to refocus Members and council officers on the importance of good governance arrangements. The range of officer and Member briefings refreshed the Council's approach to governance and reminded all stakeholders of the importance of good governance processes and procedures.

Ensuring that Cabinet Members and senior officers value the overall benefits of scrutiny is an important factor in delivering successful scrutiny. Both Cabinet Members and chief officers recognised the importance of scrutiny and the value that non-Executive Members can add to decisions. By front-loading a positive and supportive culture and good practices in scrutiny, the Council aimed to set a strong foundation for robust governance arrangements, with effective scrutiny playing a central role.

### ***Consultation***

Barnet undertook a public consultation as part of the change process to inform options for public engagement in its governance arrangements. This resulted in additional opportunities for the public to engage in its governance arrangements including consulting the public on scrutiny topics and introducing deputations at meetings.

Through these efforts, Barnet Council sought to demonstrate that, despite the inherent challenges, the move to a Cabinet system could foster a more dynamic and accountable governance model, ultimately benefiting the residents of Barnet.

## **Initiatives and Actions Taken**

Barnet Council has undertaken a series of strategic initiatives to enhance its governance and service delivery, particularly in the transition to a Cabinet system. These actions focus on improving the effectiveness of scrutiny processes, improved public engagement, and ensuring robust training for both Members and officers:

### **Task and Finish Groups**

A core initiative was the establishment of Task and Finish Groups to undertake focused reviews of specific issues of local concern. The Council aspired to complete six groups annually, but faced some initial challenges with developing and agreeing a scope for each review and galvanizing Members to give their time to a new and unknown entity. Despite these difficulties, significant progress has been made with reviews undertaken into: Highways; Discharge to Assess; Elective Home Education; Primary Care Access; and Youth Homelessness.

### **Public Engagement**

Early public engagement was prioritised to ensure that issues of concern to residents and community groups were aligned with the scrutiny work programme. A public consultation exercise was conducted asking residents, "What topics would you like to see on the scrutiny work programme?" This initiative captured valuable community insights. Groups such as Healthwatch Barnet and various community organisations contributed, helping to prioritise these topics for scrutiny.

### **Inclusive Stakeholder Involvement**

The Council involved diverse stakeholders in the scrutiny process. Alongside the topics suggested by residents and community groups, political groups contributed suggestions which were then shared with the Cabinet and senior officers for information. This inclusive approach ensured that the scrutiny process was comprehensive and reflected a wide range of perspectives, and also that the senior leadership of the Council was aware of scrutiny topics.

### **Cross-Party Membership**

Cross-party membership of the Task and Finish Groups, each with a clear scope and plan, was vital to Barnet's strategy. Scrutiny Officers and officers with service-area expertise provided Members with the information to enable them to produce clear recommendations.

### **Enhanced Work Programming**

In 2023, the time available to undertake a comprehensive work programming exercise for scrutiny was shorter, leading to a limited selection of scrutiny topics. However, work programming in 2024 has had more feasible timelines and the processes for Task and Finish Groups have been refined, resulting in better-informed topic selection. Work programmes for the committees and sub-committees have been agreed for 2024-25 with a proposed list of Task and Finish Groups that

strongly reflects the concerns of residents and community groups. The active Task and Finish Groups for 2023-24 can be viewed [here](#), with suggestions for 2024-25 in development.

### **Training and Cultural Shift**

Officers received comprehensive training on reporting to Cabinet and scrutiny, gaining a deep understanding of their roles within the new model. Whilst some Members may have felt some early resistance, it is important to recognise that any change process takes time to embed, and the focus on equity between Cabinet and scrutiny has gradually been taken on board.

Pre-decision scrutiny has allowed non-executive Members to influence decisions before they are taken, and no call-ins have occurred so far. Cabinet Members and officers are well-prepared for scrutiny meetings and the processes are well-embedded, with effective engagement from all Members.

These initiatives show Barnet Council's commitment to improving governance through further increasing its public and stakeholder involvement. By addressing the challenges and leveraging opportunities, the Council has in place a dynamic and accountable governance model.

### **Outcomes and Impact**

Barnet has delivered an optimal governance structure and positive culture between the Cabinet, non-executive Members, and senior officers.

### **Leadership and Member Engagement**

The Chairs of the scrutiny committees are developing in their roles. Scrutiny Officers provide effective support to Chairs and committee members, but more work is required to ensure that scrutiny is Member-led, effective at holding the Cabinet to account, and examining issues of concern for the community.

### **Monitoring Outcomes**

Monitoring the impact of scrutiny is essential to demonstrating its effectiveness. Scrutiny Officers have developed a system for tracking actions and recommendations to ensure that referrals are made to the relevant parties and responses are provided.

### **Public Engagement**

Public engagement, linking with residents and community groups, has been positive particularly through Task and Finish Groups. For example, a survey on elective home education received 49 responses. This initiative supports a culture of active Member engagement, extending their involvement beyond council meetings to spend even more time talking to people in the community and directly addressing issues.

## **Independent Members and Co-Production Model**

The inclusion of co-opted and independent Members has been a positive development. In addition to the statutory co-opted and independent Members, Barnet has opted to appoint Advisers to one of their sub-committees to directly introduce the user voice in relation to health and social care matters. Co-opted/independent Members and Advisers ask insightful and probing questions, enhancing the quality of scrutiny.

## **Focus on Local Issues**

Barnet has emphasised that scrutiny is focused on issues affecting the borough, irrespective of party politics. This approach includes topics outside the Council's immediate remit, such as local health services, and therefore does not only consider the Council's obligations.

## **Political Neutrality in Scrutiny**

So far, scrutiny in Barnet has not been overly party political and opportunities for opposition have been 'designed-in', including Member questions at Cabinet, questions to the Leader and Cabinet Members at Council, and motions at Council – this allows for opposition and political debate outside of scrutiny. Task and Finish Groups in Barnet have led to some very positive cross-party working, with the focus on local issues and service improvement rising above ideological differences.

## **Lessons Learned**

### ***Top Tips from Barnet Officers***

**Run it like a project:** Treat the transition as a project with a dedicated project manager to keep everything on track. This approach ensures systematic progress and accountability.

**Utilise a model constitution:** Starting with a model constitution provides a fresh slate, which can then be customised to incorporate features from the previous constitution, ensuring continuity and familiarity.

**Exploit opportunities for scrutiny:** Use scrutiny as a tool to drive improvements in public service, focusing on impact and outcomes. Effective scrutiny can lead to significant enhancements in service delivery and governance.

**Comprehensive training:** Invest in and continuously evaluate training for both officers and Members to ensure they understand the new system and their roles within it. This helps mitigate resistance and confusion and supports everyone to be prepared well in advance for the changes. Corporate understanding is crucial to an effective governance structure.

**Adopt a 'Yes' attitude:** Embrace the tide for change and focus on doing what you can rather than getting bogged down by details. Accept that perfection may not be immediate and that

improvement is a continuous process. If you support your Scrutiny Team and empower them to deliver change, you'll be surprised what they come up with!

By learning from these experiences, Barnet Council will continue to refine its governance processes, and other councils considering similar changes can draw valuable lessons from this journey.

## Future Directions

**Organisational awareness:** We will be looking to raise the profile of Overview and Scrutiny, ensuring that people understand the value it adds. It can be difficult to make time for these sorts of activities but we see the time spent on promotion as an investment, the return being that people will remember to incorporate scrutiny into the decision-making process – the power of relationships in scrutiny cannot be underestimated.

**Forward planning:** Organisationally, we are focusing on improving our future planning, including earlier confirmation of items on the Cabinet Forward Plan and other Committee work programmes (even if the timescales are provisional). For Overview and Scrutiny, this will mean earlier awareness and engagement, the ability to build pre-decision scrutiny into the decision-making process, and hopefully better collaborative working across the board.

**Refining our processes:** A key aim for the future is to increase our pace of delivery through simplification, standardisation, and automation. Practically, this will involve user-friendly templates, Task and Finish Group monitoring tools, and maintaining active records of requests and ideas. We will also be looking to continue consciously analysing our processes and our written materials to identify opportunities for improvements.

**Engagement:** In 2023-24, we worked with the Council's 'Engage Barnet' (public participation) Team to design and publish a public consultation to source topics for the Overview and Scrutiny annual work programme; this led to over 50 suggestions which provided fresh ideas and informed Members about the issues that local people were currently interested in. We also asked officers and Members about their experiences of the Overview and Scrutiny function during the first year of the new governance model. These feedback exercises have been enlightening and we will be looking to repeat them annually.

If you have any questions or would like to collaborate, please contact [scrutiny@barnet.gov.uk](mailto:scrutiny@barnet.gov.uk) – we are happy to share ideas and resources.

For more detail, check out the [Barnet Council Overview and Scrutiny Annual Report 2023-24](#).