

MAYOR'S SPEECH TO ANNUAL COUNCIL MEETING: 23 MAY 2024

Chair, congratulations on your re-election this municipal year, and also congratulations to Cllr Imam Haque as Deputy Chair of Council.

I am looking forward to working with you both in your roles as the London Borough of Newham's first citizens, and as exemplary advocates of what is amazing and beautiful about our wonderful borough, Newham.

Colleagues, we are meeting in the shadow of the death of five-year-old Aalim Makail Jibril; and meeting one week on from the painful memory of his tragic death in the early hours of last Thursday morning.

We beautifully heard the eloquent recitation of the Holy Quran. As we marked Aalim's passing with a one-minute silence earlier, I know all here share a collective sorrow at this heart-breaking tragedy, and profoundly saddening loss.

On behalf of the members here, everyone at the Council and, no doubt, all the people of our wonderful Newham community, my deepest condolences to Aalim's family at what will be an unimaginable time of hurt, trauma and grief.

We are thinking too of friends of the family and neighbours at Jacobs House, as well as the wider community in Plaistow.

I know from meeting Jacobs House residents and members of the community last Thursday and over the weekend, how much Aalim's death has impacted them, and the shared grief and mourning there is.

And I pay tribute to the many acts of kindness neighbours and the community have shown as they support the family and each other at this saddest time.

There is also disbelief that such a horrific accident could possibly happen; and many questions are rightly being asked.

So colleagues, this evening I wanted to first provide an update following the announcement last week that the Council had launched an investigation to reach the fullest possible understanding of what happened and establish the facts.

Earlier today, I issued a statement with some more details about that investigation, which is being led by the Council's internal audit team. Internal audit in local government is legally required to be independent.

They will conclude their investigation by 12 June after which a further update will be provided by the Council; and me.

The internal audit team is presently looking at a number of issues as part of its investigation including: the management of the property in question in the past two years; an examination

of records of all correspondence concerning windows specifically, as well repairs and maintenance of the flat by the Council.

They will also examine any complaints received from Aalim's family and review interaction with the family by the Council's housing services department.

Additionally, the internal audit team will consider all contractors used; assess their qualifications and relevant safety accreditations; and examine whether the housing services department followed the Council's own policies of inspecting and assessing all work carried out after they were completed.

Be assured that once the independent internal audit team completes its investigation, the Council intends to make the findings public. Of course, prior to any publication, Aalim's family will be given a copy of the report.

All the while, the Council will continue to support Aalim's devastated family, as well as other families living in Jacobs House and the local community as there is a profound sense of grief being experienced by so many and we rightly need to support them in this moment of deep loss and pain.

I will continue to ask questions of the Council following the heart-breaking loss of Aalim's life that no one would ever have wished for.

For Aalim and in his memory, for his family and to ensure that any lessons that may need to be learnt by the Council will be.

For me as the Mayor of Newham, truth and justice must and will prevail as I stand here, and always, as an advocate on behalf of all residents. Particularly those marginalised without a voice and those who are held back because of the colour of their skin, their gender, their sexuality, their age, or any aspect of their background.

When I was elected in 2018 housing was one of my key priorities.

Not just building the genuinely affordable homes that Newham residents desperately need and can afford, but reversing the decades of decline in our estates, and improving the way we managed our stock and carried out repairs.

I've made no secret of the scale of the challenge we faced or the deep-rooted, longstanding issues that we have had to tackle.

Way back, council homes had been outsourced to what was then known as the Newham Homes ALMO.

When I stepped into office there was a legacy of under-investment and maintenance problems. Would you believe that even some short six years ago the repairs service was still paper-based.

There was no single housing directorate in the Council, with responsibilities spread across 10 Heads of Service, with little join up between different teams.

There was no established ways to engage with residents themselves. No proper ways for the resident voice to be heard.

Member colleagues were briefed last week on the inspection visit that has taken place here at the Council this week by the government's Social Housing Regulator of the Council's housing stock.

We have been open and transparent with the regulator on the issues we face and the progress we still have to make.

The regulator's report will be an important tool in our on-going journey to improve our housing services to Newham, as we build a fairer Newham, and also improve the Council.

Chair, colleagues will know that Newham faces an unprecedented homelessness challenge and crisis, and the cost of Temporary Accommodation has sky rocketed over the past 15 months.

That is why we are building and delivering new homes our people can afford; and we are making great strides.

We are amongst the top councils in the country for new council home starts as the country grapples with a housing crisis.

For instance, I am pleased to announce that this autumn the first phase of the ambitious Carpenters Estate restoration programme will kick start with James Riley Point, which will benefit from a £3.28 million grant from Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund.

It'll be our first major retrofit scheme leading to 136 high-quality social rent homes and brand new community centre at the heart of a restored neighbourhood, too long neglected and where local residents had lost hope.

Alongside a new facade allowing for high levels of thermal insulation, every home will have air source heat pump, meaning energy-efficient homes to support household finances.

The Council's 'retrofit first' strategy on the Carpenters Estate, delivered by our wholly owned housing company Populo Living, will see the retention and upgrade of at least 40 percent of the existing homes on the estate, including the refurbishment of James Riley Point to Passive Haus standards as we advance our Just Transition Climate Action response.

But Temporary Accommodation is still a challenge for us here at the Council.

Newham has:

6,513 households in Temporary Accommodation at end April 2024. But this is not just a statistic, it's about lives. It is the highest proportion of residents in Temporary Accommodation in London

And one of the highest rates of overcrowding in the country, where 25 percent of Newham households are overcrowded, including homes with kids.

It has created an extraordinary burden for the Council and is not sustainable.

At Council in March, we approved a balanced budget that, despite the financial challenges, invests, protects and improves the crucial services we provide for residents.

A budget that continues to invest in making sure primary school children don't go to school hungry, through our Eat for Free programme.

A budget that protects our children's centres and youth services, such as the new Shipman Youth Zone, giving young people access to activities and services and the opportunity to fulfil their potential.

A budget that continues to support residents hardest hit by the cost of living emergency.

A budget that continues to invest in building new affordable Newham homes.

Councils in England face a £4-billion-pound funding gap after years of funding cuts, the highest levels of inflation for 40 years, and increasing demand for services.

In these challenging financial and economic times our first priority is to ensure Newham remains financially stable.

So we can continue to deliver the crucial services that residents depend on.

And that means continuing our transformation journey, to make sure we're an organisation that can deliver for our residents.

Taking a preventative approach to service design, with services designed around the needs of the people who use them.

Taking a place-based visionary approach with greater collaboration with our local partners.

Better use of digital and technology to make it easier for residents to access services and find the information they need easily.

We will be bringing proposals to Cabinet in July on a new operating model for the Council and a three year MTFS.

And how in a leaner organisation we can target our resources where they will have greatest impact on the services and outcomes we deliver for residents.

Because this is an ambitious administration that wants to change the borough for the better.

To build a fairer Newham where everyone is Healthy, Happy and Well.

Where through Community Wealth Building we build an inclusive economy where everyone has the opportunity to thrive.

Progress with the people. It's on our coat of arms.

Progress for the people, because it's our duty to serve.

Building a Fairer Newham is our purpose, our mission. It's my ambition.

That's no overnight job. It's a generational transformation that will change forever this borough and the lives of everyone who lives here.

Because it's the people of Newham that make this borough so great. And I commit myself again to doing my best for them, now and always, and especially in the year ahead.