

London Borough of Hammersmith & Fulham

Policy and Oversight Board Minutes



Monday 11 December 2023

PRESENT

Committee members: Councillors Lisa Homan (Chair), Jacolyn Daly, Natalia Perez, Nikos Souslous, Rory Vaughan, Victoria Brocklebank-Fowler and Rebecca Harvey

Other Councillors: Councillor Rebecca Harvey (Cabinet Member for Community Safety and Social Inclusion)

Officers:

Jacqui McShannon (Director of Children's Services)
Matthew Sales (Assistant Director, Programmes, Assurance and Analytics)
Bathsheba Mall (Programme Lead)
Brenda Whinnett (Youth Voice Coordinator)
David Abbott (Head of Governance)

Guests and other attendees:

Anastasia (Member of Youth Parliament)
Ealaf (Youth Councillor)
Precisa (Youth Councillor)
Adam (Youth Councillor)
Ellaria (Youth Councillor)
Sarah Lumgair (People Arise Now)
Stephan Wiedmer (Crosslight)
Phil Storey (H&F Food Bank)

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Nicole Trehy and Helen Rowbottom.

Apologies for lateness were received from Councillor Rebecca Harvey. She joined the meeting at 7.20pm.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS

There were no declarations of interest.

3. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the meeting held on 18 September 2023 were agreed as an accurate record.

4. UPDATE ON YOUTH VOICE

Brenda Whinnett (Youth Voice Coordinator) introduced the item that covered recent developments to strengthen the reach and impact of youth voice in Hammersmith & Fulham.

Brenda was joined by Anastasia, the borough's Member of Youth Parliament, and Youth Councillors Ealaf, Precisa, Adam, and Ellaria. They discussed the work they'd undertaken during the year with officers and partners to research, define, and action the priorities of young people on the following areas of focus:

- Inclusion
- Mental health and emotional wellbeing
- Life skills (preparation for adulthood)
- Staying safe
- Work experience and work readiness.

Councillor Nikos Souselous asked about young people's fear or lack of trust in the police and what could be done to improve it. Anastasia said the Youth Council held a workshop with young people and the police to help build trust and they wanted to do more in future.

Councillor Rory Vaughan asked how the Youth Council identified their priority areas, how they communicated their work to young people, and how they judged if their initiatives were successful. Anastasia said there had been youth elections in March 2022 and candidates ran on a range of issues. Once elected, they had produced a video on key topics, gathered responses from young people, and then met with professionals to see where the gaps they had identified could be bridged. She noted that in many cases the services were there, but young people didn't know how to access them. Brenda Whinnett added that they always provided young people with feedback on their work. She said they had undertaken a large inclusive research project over the summer where they had spoken with over 2,000 young people to identify their needs.

Councillor Natalia Perez asked if there were any groups that were particularly hard to reach and what the main requests from young people were about.

Brenda Whinnett said they had been working more with young carers and were working with Jack Tizard School to engage non-verbal young people. To that end, they ran a youth voice art in the park session during the summer attended by Disabled young people and care experienced young people. Regarding the most common requests, she said sexual health was a focus.

Jacqui McShannon (Director of Children's Services) said it would be helpful to involve health colleagues and look at healthy relationships and health and wellbeing

more generally when procuring health services, rather than focusing purely on physical health. Members suggested this as an area for the Health and Adult Social Care Policy and Accountability to consider.

ACTION: David Abbott / Councillor Natalia Perez

Councillor Jacolyn Daly asked if housing and homelessness was one of the priorities and felt it was important to include the voices of young people in temporary accommodation given the impact on their education and wellbeing. Brenda Whinnett said it was not one of the current priorities but recognised it was an important issue and said it would be considered next year (2024).

ACTION: Brenda Whinnett

Councillor Vaughan said he welcomed feedback from the Youth Council on any issues under the remit of the Economy, Arts, Sports, and Public Realm Policy and Accountability Committee that had an impact on young people.

Jacqui McShannon thanked the members of the Board and said they welcomed the interest. The assigned strategic leads had been tasked with taking the areas discussed forward and would be bringing items to the relevant PACs.

ACTION: Strategic Leads / Brenda Whinnett

Councillor Vaughan asked if the Youth Council were involved with the Council's London Borough of Culture bid. Brenda Whinnett confirmed they were already heavily involved and had fed into the bid preparation work.

The Chair asked that future Policy and Accountability Committees reports include a section to record whether the Youth Council have been involved.

ACTION: David Abbott

The Chair asked Ellaria how she had found the Youth Council as a new member. Ellaria said it had been very enjoyable, with productive discussions on important topics. Adam added that he appreciates that they were being listened to and could affect change. He highlighted the wonderful support system that Brenda Whinnett had created for them. Ealaf noted that Youth Council was structured in such a way that allowed people to contribute to the projects they were most interested in, which ensured engagement remained high and people were passionate about what they were working on.

The Chair thanked Brenda Whinnett and the Youth Council members for attending and the work they had carried out over the year. She reiterated the need to ensure strategic leads worked with the Policy and Accountability Chairs and drove progress against the priorities.

RESOLVED

1. For the Board to note and comment on the approach and progress and agree how to support the next steps.

2. For the Board to identify a link Policy and Accountability Chair to support the young people with each of their priority areas.

5. CONTINUING RESPONSE TO THE COST-OF-LIVING CRISIS

Matthew Sales (Assistant Director, Programmes, Assurance and Analytics) presented the report which showed the continued priority the Council was giving to supporting residents and businesses through the Cost-of-Living crisis, working with local voluntary and community sector organisations and local partners as part of the Cost of Living Alliance. It described the range of new and continued statutory, discretionary and partner schemes that formed part of the Council's response programme.

The Chair welcomed Sarah Lumgair (People Arise Now), Stephan Wiedmer (Crosslight), and Phil Storey (H&F Food Bank) to the meeting and asked them for their insights into the level of need in the borough and what support was required.

Phil Storey said food bank usage in the borough had doubled from 2022 to 2023, with over 2000 clients per month. He said the need for food and fuel was high. He noted that the Cost of Living Alliance approach had been positive, with the voluntary sector, public sector, and business working together. He also noted that the task and finish group approach had been productive. He gave the example of a group tasked with looking at a signposting tool. The group pulled together providers, looked at signposting tools on the market, and presented a business case. The project was at the procurement stage at the time of the meeting.

Stephan Wiedmer said Crosslight had a high level of enquiries, with no drop over the summer as there had been in previous years. He noted that due to the housing crisis they saw more private sector clients, and families in particular. He said the Alliance had been positive but felt the partners could be more proactive about promoting available family activities and support.

Sarah Lumgair said People Arise Now aimed to help communities thrive, particularly focusing on family members of offenders. She thanked the Council and the Alliance for their support and highlighted Councillors Nikos Souslous and Ben Coleman in particular for their help and guidance. She noted that a significant amount of her time was spent on the phone to the Council to try and help people get answers about their benefits. She felt customer service for certain services had gotten worse, with longer wait times.

Councillor Rebecca Harvey (Cabinet Member for Social Inclusion and Community Safety) said she was working closely with officers to improve customer services. She said the Council was keen to listen to residents and partners, and had held cost of living events to gather feedback to improve the services and support available.

Councillor Victoria Brocklebank-Fowler asked where the funding for the pre-payment vouchers came from. Matthew Sales said they were purchased from the fuel bank

foundation using Cost of Living funding and the fuel bank foundation had also secured funding from energy companies.

Councillor Brocklebank-Fowler noted that utility companies had their own hardship funds and asked how the Council determined people had applied for the appropriate fund. Matthew Sales said the support provided by the Council was for residents who had been cut off, or who were at a high risk of being cut off from their energy supply. Regarding broader needs, he noted that the Council had a dedicated cost of living support team who had completed assessments for 1,500 residents and they considered a wide range of support including council tax support, food bank referrals, support from charities, and support from energy companies.

Councillor Jacolyn Daly noted that the Housing and Homelessness Policy and Accountability Committee that she chaired had been looking at the cost of fuel for social housing residents and how greening the housing stock (retrofitting with energy saving technology) would impact those on low incomes. She asked if officers had a sense of when the benefits of retrofitting would come into force and how long short-term solutions like vouchers would be needed for. Matthew Sales said the current cost of living schemes were designed to address the immediate crisis and The Winter Ready Homes grants and the Council's retrofit strategy would deliver benefits over time.

Councillor Daly asked about the difficulty people had trying to access discretionary housing payments and the impact it had. Stephan Wiedmer said Crosslight carried out a lot of applications. It was frustrating for those on the downsizing list with no progress. He said he had some clients in rent arrears, at threat of eviction, who had been applying every year but weren't offered anything appropriate to downsize.

Councillor Perez discussed the difficulty for those renting in the private sector, with bidding wars and rising rents.

Councillor Daly asked what areas the guests would like to see the Council's Housing and Homelessness Policy and Accountability Committee focus on. Stephan Wiedmer said he would like more Council housing and key worker flats. He also said it would be good to have greater transparency around the process, including the chances of getting a property.

Councillor Victoria Brocklebank-Fowler noted that a previous Conservative Administration brought in the Council Tax Support Scheme and she was glad it had continued. She highlighted that the Council was no longer using bailiffs and asked if it had affected the amount of Council Tax being collected. The Chair said officers could provide exact figures but from her conversations with Councillor Rowan Ree (Cabinet Member for Finance and Reform) she believed the collection rate under the Ethical Debt policy was largely unchanged.

ACTION: Sukvinder Kalsi

Councillor Nikos Souslous asked what the £1m cost of living support fund was spent on and how it supported residents. Matthew Sales said there was a breakdown of the spend in the table at the end of the report.

Councillor Souslous noted the Government had signalled the Household Support Fund would be withdrawn in April 2024 and asked what impact that would have on residents. Matthew Sales explained that the Household Support Fund was a Government grant that started during the Covid pandemic and then became essential to the anti-poverty strategy. The expectation was that it would end in March 2024 but it had not been confirmed. The Government had written to the Council to say it was under review, but that made it difficult to plan as it was a key source of funding to help the Council to support residents. Officers were looking at the implications of it being withdrawn.

The Chair asked when the Council would know more. Matthew Sales said it was unknown and could be as late as the Spring 2024 budget.

Councillor Perez asked for more information on the signposting tool mentioned earlier. Phil Storey said there had been no good tool to connect agencies together. The goal was to procure a tool focused on signposting referrals that linked voluntary and statutory services together to encourage earlier intervention. Bathsheba Mall added that the aim was to deliver the tool in March or April 2024. She said it was a good example of partnership working with the Alliance partners.

Councillor Vaughan noted the thousands of families that have been supported through the work discussed in the report and asked to have his thanks put on record. He then asked about the numbers of people requiring support and the available resources. Phil Storey said 70% of clients who used the food bank only needed between one and three vouchers to manage short term issues. They were trying to help people resolve practical issues through Citizens Advice and other organisations to avoid the need for more support later on. They focused on simple solutions using a cash first approach.

Matthew Sales said across the full year we expected to make 45,000 awards to residents which was around 17,000 to 18,000 households, but he couldn't provide the number of unique residents or households.

Councillor Daly noted over 15,000 calls had been taken from residents and asked how the learning from them had been used. Matthew Sales said officers were using the lessons learned from those conversations to inform the longer-term strategic approach to tackling poverty.

Councillor Harvey addressed the Board and said it had been great to have the support and cooperation of the Food Bank, Crosslight, People Arise Now, and all of the other organisations that had been a part of the Cost of Living Alliance. She said it had been a real pleasure to work with such wonderful and dedicated organisations. She also thanked Matthew Sales and Bathsheba Mall for their hard work and support.

The Chair brought the discussion to a close and noted how important it was to have the Alliance in place, both to tackle today's cost of living problems and also build on in the future. She asked for another update once the Government had made a decision on funding. She thanked everyone for attending and their contributions to the meeting.

ACTION: Matthew Sales

RESOLVED

1. That the Policy and Oversight Board note the report and provide comments and feedback to help shape and improve H&F's response to the COL crisis going forward.

6. POLICY AND ACCOUNTABILITY COMMITTEES' UPDATE REPORT

This report outlines the areas of work and reports considered by each of the Council's six Policy and Accountability Committees at their meetings in November.

Councillor Victoria Brocklebank-Fowler asked why the Children and Education Policy and Accountability Committee hadn't considered a report on the borough's exam results. Officers explained that the Committee received an annual school performance report in March. Councillor Brocklebank-Fowler asked that future reports included leavers destinations.

ACTION: David Abbott

Councillor Natalia Perez highlighted that the Health and Adult Social Care Policy and Accountability Committee had requested a task and finish group to look at improving vaccination rates in the borough.

RESOLVED

1. To note the updates of the Policy and Accountability Committees and discuss any areas for future review or collaboration.
2. To approve the request from the Health and Adult Social Care Policy and Accountability Committee for a Task and Finish Group on improving vaccination rates in the borough.

7. WORK PROGRAMME

Councillor Jacolyn Daly asked that the Voter ID report included information on the Central Government budget grant for publicising the new requirements.

The Chair suggested the following item to add to the work programme:

- Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in Local Government – exploratory item looking at what AI is, its potential uses, challenges, and risks.

RESOLVED

1. That the Board note the draft work programme for 2023/24 and suggest any additions or amendments.

8. DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

The following dates of future meetings were noted:

- 23 Jan 2024
- 29 Apr 2024

Meeting started: 7.00 pm
Meeting ended: 8.55 pm

Chair

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