

London Borough of Hammersmith & Fulham

Policy and Oversight Board Minutes



Monday 12 December 2022

PRESENT

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

Other Councillors: Rebecca Harvey, Cabinet Member for Social Inclusion and Community Safety, Bora Kwon, Cabinet Member for Civic Renewal, Rowan Ree, Cabinet Member for Finance and Reform

Officers: Veronica Barella, Chief Digital Officer; Nicola Ellis, Assistant Director Stefan Robinson, Head of Policy and PMO; Matthew Sales, Assistant Director - Programmes and Assurance (T); Himesh Mehta, Head of Climate Change (T)

Guests: Derec Craig, Chief Executive Officer, Age UK (T); Stephen Wiedmer, Branch Manager, Crosslight; Alan Rides, Chief Executive Officer, West London Local Chambers (T); Shad Haibatan, Deputy Chief Executive Officer, Head of Engagement & Partnerships Sobus

1. **APOLOGIES**

Apologies were received from Councillor Nicole Trehy.

2. **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Councillor Nikos Souslous declared an interest in Agenda Item 4, as a trustee of Hammersmith United Charity, which provided funding to Crosslight. Councillor Natalia Perez declared an interest in Agenda Item 4, as a trustee of Hammersmith United Charity, which provided funding to Crosslight.

3. **MINUTES**

RESOLVED

That the minutes of the previous meeting held on 12 September 2022 were agreed as an accurate record.

4. THE COST-OF-LIVING CRISIS: WORKING TOGETHER TO IMPROVE THE LOCAL RESPONSE

Stefan Robinson provided an overview of the council's response and related activities to the cost of living (CoL) crisis and how the impact on residents could be mitigated by a range of both local and national measures. Driven by a number of factors including the impact of a global pandemic and post-recovery related activities, it was recognised that the main drivers were high inflation and the continued rise of cost of utilities and food, the expected increase being between £2-3k per household. The overall economic evidence indicated that there would be a significant impact on lower income families and the 51% of residents (above the London average) who rented properties.

Activities offered targeted support to 3500 households identified as the most economically vulnerable and a CoL heat map had been developed which offered an evidenced based insight of the localities expected to be hardest hit. Activities included a cost of living advice and helpline and an advice booklet offering help on accessing support and this would be provided to residents. A strategy for the work was predicated on robust data insight, co-production and good governance. Plans for a borough-wide alliance partnership were being implemented, with two successful events having already taken place and a further event planned for early 2023.

Age UK – Derec Craig, Chief Executive Officer

Derec Craig outlined H&F Age UK's response to the CoL crisis, supported by the council to aid the distribution of a £200 cost of living payment to older households, and the provision of lunches subsidised by H&F Giving and Tesco, with the cost of a two course meal being reduced to £2 and available five days per week. Advice and information had also been offered, as many older people were deciding to either "heat or eat" due to a lack of certainty around the cost of energy prices and higher and unpredictable food costs. Characteristically, many older residents who did not struggle previously but might now be experiencing financial difficulties were likely to be asset rich and cash poor, which determined their spending priorities. Outreach work was being undertaken to extend support to those that had been "harder to reach". A shopping service was also available to take people to larger supermarkets.

Crosslight - Stephen Wiedmer, Branch Manager

Stephen Wiedmer provided an overview of the debt advice and support work offered by Crosslight. Demand for the service had increased significantly as more people sought advice and assistance in managing their finances. For many whose income was just sufficient, the CoL crisis had pushed them into difficulties. Crosslight offered training on money management to equip people with financial skills, supplementing this with welfare benefit advice. It was essential to maintain a network of partners to ensure support and services were well signposted and accessible.

West London Local Chamber of Commerce – Alan Rides, Chief Executive Officer

Alan Rides described the work of the West London Local Chamber of Commerce (WLLCC) as a not for profit charity supporting local businesses. The organisation

had worked hard throughout the pandemic, and now the cost of living crisis to offer networking and business growth opportunities, support and encouragement for local businesses, and advice on a range of issues including business efficiencies, grant funding and utilities. WLLCC had observed changes in the operational patterns of for example retail outlets which had reduced the number of opening hours or only opening on specific days. There was also more office space available with many people working from home and as a consequence, commercial landlords were grappling with issues such as when and for how long to heat buildings.

Sobus – Shad Habaitan, Deputy Chief Executive Officer, Head of Engagement & Partnerships

Attending on behalf of Sue Spiller, Chief Executive Officer, Sobus, Shad Habaitan reported on support provided by Sobus as council for voluntary services organisation. Sobus provided co-ordinated support for the Providers of Older Peoples Services forum (POPS) which included organisations such as Age UK, Nubian Life, Fulham Good Neighbours and other key organisations. A standing item on the POPS agenda was the CoL crisis to facilitate discussion and collaboration about how partner organisations could apply for funding and share concerns. Initiatives to tackle food poverty and social isolation and loneliness (SIL) amongst older people were also being explored.

A project on aging well had received funding from Central London Community Healthcare NHS Trust to support SIL outreach activities. A piece of work on the mental health of black and Asian minority ethnic communities from 2020 resulted in a partnership project with West London NHS Trust (WLT) and H&F. Sobus had supported the delivery of a £200k community grant scheme distributing funds to a range of diverse community organisations supporting activities that addressed the mental health of women, children and young people. Specific funding had also been provided to the Listening Space for suicide prevention work, and the Naz Foundation (India) Trust to support their work with the LGBTQIA+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, (or questioning), intersex, and asexual (or allies) communities, and to the Autism Society. These organisations had identified the long term deterioration of the mental health within their communities as consequence of the pandemic and there were indications that this could be exacerbated by the impact of the CoL crisis.

Councillor Lisa Homan invited contributors to further comment on what they had observed in terms of the increased numbers of families seeking help and how many they had been able to support. Shad Habaitan explained that Sobus was an umbrella organisation which did not provide frontline services, but many organisations had reported concerns about the lack of support from central government and underfunding in local authorities. There were increasing numbers of hardship cases, with more people using foodbanks and stark choices to be made during the winter period to heat or eat. There was in some communities a stigma attached to using foodbanks or individuals did not know how to access them, so a more proactive approach was required to address this. A black and Asian minority ethnic community health equity group on mental health was currently considering the impact of the cost of living crisis but there was a concern about the lack of outcomes following engagement. Speaking as a resident of White City, Shad Habaitan welcomed the commitment and work of the council in offering innovative support to residents and services, recognising that council funding could be applied to leverage

funding from other sources. It was also important to include the voice of residents from affected communities and one way to achieve this was through strong, collaborative partnership working.

Stephen Wiedmer explained that there was increased need and demand for support but there was a delay in money coming into the service. New clients were expected in January, and although their services were not advertised he was aware of a growing need in the community. Salaries in the public and voluntary sector were not high and recruitment was also a growing concern as organisations struggled to resource services. This was not sustainable given the need for business continuity and the importance of building trust with clients. London living costs were higher compared to other areas and hard to recruit sustainably.

Business capacity was highlighted as an issue for WLLCC. Alan Rides reported that there were higher rates of employment but the expected growth rate of 7% had significantly diminished and businesses had pivoted in response. As a not for profit organisation WLLCC had expanded in recent years and staff were paid a London Living Wage (LLW). Primarily based in H&F they provided services and advice across three boroughs. As numbers had grown, requests have increased exponentially.

Derec Craig reported that Age UK had also seen an increase in demand, with a longer wait for appointments due to lack of staff capacity. The CoL crisis had affected the organisation itself with higher operational overheads. Staff were also experiencing difficulties and maintaining a LLW was hard. Grant funding did not increase throughout the year so other sources were being sought.

Councillor Natalia Perez referred to the CoL index (appendix 1 of the report). The heat map indicated higher levels of impact in areas such as College Park and Old Oak and White City. She enquired how the sector was working in partnership at a local level, for example, the referral of complex cases with signposting to other services, and, if the advice pop-ups were in place, in addition to other measures outlined in the report. Stefan Robinson acknowledged that the CoL impact index highlighted a geographical disparity between the north and south areas of the boroughs. Warm hubs would be spaced out across the borough and there would also be a rotation of pop ups to ensure equity and parity of access. Extra copies of the CoL advice booklet were being printed to be distributed to areas where these might be more needed to ensure uptake. Matt Sales emphasised that the activities formed part of a universal offer in response to greater acuity of need. Resources were being specifically targeted, but it was important to recognise that everyone was experiencing the impact of CoL and that this had also shaped how resources were applied. Councillor Rebecca Harvey explained that the pop ups would be located in areas where people might not necessarily seek help and empowering people to do so. Advice and support would also be available at warm hub spaces.

Crosslight confirmed that they would be supporting the pop up provision recognising the importance of collaborative working with Citizens Advice and H&F Law Centre where expertise and advice regarding housing and employment law ensured that clients could receive appropriate specialist advice. Crosslight also worked with vulnerable residents with mental health concerns and who were referred by the

Claybrook Centre (Charing Cross Hospital). Being located in an urban borough with high living costs was a challenge for the organisation with a greater risk of a high turnover of staff. This combined with short term funding meant that successful projects were unsustainable, and staff resourcing was at risk, a significant concern given the importance of building and maintaining client trust. Endorsing this view, Shad Habaitan commented that collaborative cross partnership working was important as was the need to identify and remove cultural barriers. He reported that People Arise Now was currently working with the Somali community to develop good relationships and ensure robust signposting. Social commitment and compassion were integral, but it was becoming harder to recruit as a consequence of CoL and securing housing within the borough was equally challenging.

Councillor Jacolyn Daly posed a range of questions to each of the organisations. She asked WLLCC if businesses received any specific types of support offered during the pandemic that could be offered again in response to CoL. A question to Crosslight asked about what support was being sought from the council and government for residents at this time. Councillor Daly asked Age UK about the £200 payment to older people and how the assessment process for this worked, how residents received the payment and what the money might be used for. In a fourth question for Sobus, Councillor Daly referred to her role as Chair of the Housing and Homelessness Policy and Accountability Committee, she was aware that mould and damp housing conditions led to poor mental and physical health conditions and asked how the third sector and NHS could co-ordinate a response to address this.

Alan Rides explained that some businesses had varied their opening hours, Kew Gardens for example now closed at 2pm to avoid additional staff and utility costs, and in 2021, the Department for International Trade had reduced its capacity by 80%. WLLCC had stepped in to provide this support by supporting trade missions and running local events promoting businesses based in H&F, citing the example of one company manufacturing ceramic heaters that could be run on 50p per day.

Derec Craig clarified that the £200 payment was provided to eligible older people aged 60+ and due to the restrictions about the allowance, this was paid directly to the individuals utility provider. Those on a monthly payment scheme were required to evidence residency within the borough and their age. Funds were paid direct into the Age UK bank account, from which the utility provider was paid directly, covering utilities or a debt where this had accumulated or a credit if they were not in debt. If the person was on a key meter, slightly more was paid as these were a more costly way of paying for utilities and usually allocated to those already in debt with their provider.

Stephen welcomed greater clarity as to what support would be offered post-April 2023. Families were concerned about the impact of cold winter weather on health, it was hard to heat space and clearer guidance was needed. A faster determination of benefit applications would help alleviate uncertainty and concern and similarly, decision making around bedroom tax. This took time and it was hard to support residents in downsizing while they remained on the waiting list for a long time. The money available from the Department of Health and Pensions reduced annually and this created a cycle of maintaining the cost of a larger house, with no smaller property available to move to. Citing one residents experience, Stephen Wiedmer

suggested the council considers how new tenants could be supported during the transition from temporary to permanent accommodation where they lacked essential, basic furniture, and needed support to navigate the social welfare system.

Councillor Daly asked about the “no wrong door” approach and how this worked in practice. Nicola Ellis explained that the CoL advice team had been newly established in direct response to an identified need for simpler access to advice about council services relating to CoL. Advice was offered where appropriate or guidance and referral to a suitable service area was initiated as part of a co-ordinated response, rather than just signposting, for example, assistance with applying for council tax or free school meals. Additional funding had been added to the discretionary housing fund and this could and could be allocated in cases of particular hardship.

In response to Councillor Daly’s point regarding the impact of poor housing on health, Shad Habaitan explained that support and guidance on how to treat damp and mould infestation would be welcome as it was difficult to do this with some communities because of language barriers. During the pandemic, Sobus had been able to respond quickly and a similar response to address CoL could be repeated by delivering tempered key messages about how to budget safely without risking health. There was a high correlation between mental health and deprivation in particularly deprived parts of the borough such as White City, where life expectancy was ten years shorter compared to more affluent areas. There had also been a lack of investment in social housing for many years in the UK, which needed to be addressed. Voluntary sector partners welcomed the opportunity to be treated as equal partners with greater involvement in co-designing and co-producing services to build more trust. Citing the decades known issue of higher rates of poor mental health amongst black men, Shad Habaitan encouraged more focus on preventative public health to fundamentally change the way in which mental health services were delivered. The work of DEBK, a local charity was highlighted, which provided hardship grants to people in need. The charity had seen a significant growth in demand for their support.

Councillor Helen Rowbottom asked contributors whether business and organisations had consolidated their office spaces, for example, through the colocation of services, and if guidance and support was being provided in helping residents access lower utility tariffs. Elaborating on Councillor Daly’s point regarding “no wrong door”, Councillor Rowbottom asked if direct contact was made with residents in their homes through for example by proxy or referral.

Matt Sales confirmed that a data sharing agreement was not in place but that this may be something for the proposed alliance partnership to consider. Councillor Rebecca Harvey added that it was difficult for advice agencies to share client details and there were difficulties in establishing case figures, identifying patterns in terms of enquiries. Considering the eligibility for several types of take up was also challenging. Councillor Rowbottom acknowledged that sharing data and referrals could result in delays or lower take up and highlighted the need to explore this, considering for example, the impact of stigma. Visiting a clients home could be an innovative solution to address this.

Focusing on the outputs, Councillor Harvey reported that there had been millions of pounds of unclaimed pension credits that people were entitled to that remained unclaimed. Identifying individuals who were eligible to claim reflected how targeted support and guidance could be invaluable. Shad Habaitan acknowledged that issues around data sharing protocols were a challenge, and that this had been a barrier in their work with WLT in seeking granular, anonymised ethnic breakdown of service figures. The data would do much to help inform better designed services and facilitate improved ways of connecting with communities. Matt Sales added that 50 organisations had participated in two large conferences arranged by the council sharing qualitative data on shared experiences, insights and expertise.

Addressing the point on home visits, Hinesh Mehta reported that these were undertaken as part of the GLA funded Warmer Homes scheme. Houses with a low EPC (Energy Performance Certificate) rating of e, f or g were eligible as they leaked a lot of energy and were therefore more expensive to heat. Help and advice had been offered to help residents to apply for grant funding for up to £25k for home improvements that would help improve the buildings energy efficiency.

Councillor Rory Vaughan invited contributors to share what they regarded as a potential gap in the support being offered and what the opportunities there were for businesses to work with residents. Alan Rides responded that businesses were in a state of flux, citing the example of GlaxoSmithKline moving from Brentford to Oxford Street, the HSBC bank workforce were not returning to offices in Canary Wharf and working from home (there were no branches in H&F, the nearest one being Bond Street). Councillor Rowbottom acknowledged that this significant shift to digital services was a business decision based on sustainability but had spanned multiple industries and sectors. Commenting on a suggestion to co-locate services in a shared space Derec Craig felt that funding was an issue. Funding became easier to leverage if a recipient organisation was grant funded by the council but establishing a consortium, for example such as Sobus, as vehicle for group funding could alleviate some of the pressures.

Stephen Wiedmer observed that the CoL crisis had impacted on the next generation. Participation in activities and sports offered an outlet that helped to prevent or alleviate mental health pressures for young people and their families. It was important to utilise warm spaces, for example and there was a communication point around how communities could be better informed about these activities. To illustrate, the Youth Zone was unaffordable for many families on low income. Shad Habaitan recognised many of these issues as being first highlighted as a consequence of the pandemic. Working from home had meant that some young people had missed opportunities that would have supported their social development skills. Collaboration was improved through face to face contact which had been significantly reduced as a result of the pandemic. A similar consequence might be manifested due to the impact of the CoL crisis on young and older people and guidance about how to address this was welcome. It was suggested that a solution could be greater collaboration between businesses and the voluntary sector, on for example issues such as offering a warm space. Local businesses were a vibrant part of the community and had much to offer in terms of utilising opportunities to address community needs.

Councillor Nikos Souslous stated that the council's administration had committed to supporting a third sector strategy and invited contributors to share their views about their interactions with the council, what had worked well and what had not. Sobus outlined that one of the challenges had been the high turnover of key staff at the council and that greater continuity was needed. A second point was expressed about having meaningful engagement and the third sector being treated as equal partners. It was recognised that council staff offered a high degree of commitment and goodwill and that the council had done a great deal to invest locally and made progress through their commitment to co-design and coproduction. Criticisms lay with central government having reduced the power of local authorities to support vulnerable communities.

Councillor Perez recognised the importance of building economic resilience and asked contributors about what the council could do to support new start-ups such as the North End Road market supporting independent businesses. Alan Rides referred to the business incubator hub at White City as an example of how growth in small businesses could be nurtured and supported. Public private partnerships could be more sustainable with longer term funding with a greater chance of achieving growth.

Councillor Harvey encapsulated the central issues, explaining that co-ordinated activities such as advice to improve benefit take up, applying for fuel vouchers and the advice booklet aimed to empower residents to seek help. Fast track funding grants had helped support projects that would sustain vulnerable groups. The advice line had "upskilled" staff to deliver a "no wrong front door" approach and this would be taken forward and positively built on by an alliance partnership. There were about 60k people in the borough looking for work and businesses with recruitment issues so it was feasible to try and to put in place support to address this. Projects such as the foodbank and the Nourish project reflected a desire to utilise resources more efficiently to ensure that communities received the help and support they need.

Councillor Homan summarised the key points of the discussion, suggestions and areas that required further exploration or action.

- There were a range of activities being undertaken to support housing residents and tenants associations and borough residents;
- Two conferences involving business and third sector organisations from across the borough had taken place, with a number of actions being delivered as outputs, including a plan to establish an alliance partnership;
- Digital exclusion (an issue considered at the previous meeting of the committee) and how residents were impacted by the closure of local, high street banks;
- Effective community engagement and the co-production and the co-design of services informed by the views and needs of residents, this was a key council commitment and integral to how the council delivered services;
- To consider how the council could help to address data sharing issues across different organisations;
- To provide more agile support for residents by enabling faster decision making and assessments;

- Staffing and recruitment at the council – this was noted as a challenge for all organisations compounded by the prohibitive cost of living in London and the pandemic;
- Mental health service provision for young and older people and how this had been exacerbated by the CoL;
- Further information to be sought about low cost ceramic heaters; and
- Further details about the location of the CoL pop ups to be made available.

Councillor Homan thanked all the participants for their contributions and participation in the discussion.

5. DEVELOPING OUR DIGITAL INCLUSION STRATEGY

Nicola Ellis provided an update and feedback on actions that arose from the previous meeting. There had been continued engagement with the Digital Action Group (DAG) which had identified barriers to digital inclusion and possible solutions which would be included in the final digital strategy. There had also been a successful event held in Lyric Square.

The use of Wi-Fi was clarified, there was no charge for this but there was a charge to use a desktop computer and a fee was charged for the first hour of this. Libraries were identified as a valuable resource as staff were able to assist residents with technical advice. Nicola Ellis added that work was ongoing to ensure that residents could access social tariffs for Wi-Fi and that 145 King Street would re-open in January 2023 to offer face to face services.

In response to the query regarding adult learning course, more work was required but a team had been identified to support this. Collaborative partnership work with the Mayor of London's Chief Digital Officer, LOTI (London Office of Technology & Innovation) and Good Things Foundation ensure the development of a strong digital ecosystem that was being built.

Councillor Victoria Brocklebank-Fowler welcomed the update and the commitment to resolving issues and clarified that her query had been about free access to Wi-Fi rather than desktops.

Councillor Jacolyn Daly also welcomed the update. Referencing an education project with St Mungo's being delivered in hostels, she asked officers if digital skills were being offered as part of this provision, and if it was not could this be suggested. It was noted that there would be continued work with adult learning to explore the wider benefits of including digital skills in the adult learning curriculum.

Councillor Lisa Homan requested that members be sent a link to the CoL council advice pages and noted that these were live but that there would be ongoing work to make the site more user friendly, expected to be completed in January 2023. Councillor Homan welcomed the progress to date on addressing potential gaps in provision and noted that there was a follow up action on digital inclusion and access to financial services.

Councillor Natalia Perez enquired how representative the DAG group were of the community. Nicola Ellis responded that the group was diverse and representative and included a number of younger residents. The work on developing the DAG had drawn upon coproduction work and so the group reflected a good balance of officers and diverse representatives from the community. Some members of the group had left and there was a process of recruiting new members to the group.

RESOLVED

That the report was noted.

6. POLICY AND ACCOUNTABILITY COMMITTEE CHAIR'S UPDATE

Councillor Victoria Brocklebank-Fowler asked why the Children's Services and Education Policy and Accountability Committee had not reported on positive exam results in the borough obtained in the previous academic year. It was noted that the announcement of exam results may not have aligned with the timing of meetings, but was an item that the committee usually considered. It was agreed that this would be followed up by officers after the meeting.

RESOLVED

That the report was noted.

7. WORK PROGRAMME

Councillor Lisa Homan confirmed that the substantive item for the next meeting of the committee would be the council's medium term financial strategy.

8. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

It was confirmed that the date of the meeting would be rescheduled*.

*(*This was later confirmed as 24 January 2023)*

Meeting started: 7.25pm

Meeting ended: 9.45pm

Chair

Contact officer: Bathsheba Mall
Committee Co-ordinator
Governance and Scrutiny
☎: 077766772816
E-mail: bathsheba.mall@lbhf.gov.uk