

LONDON BOROUGH OF HAMMERSMITH & FULHAM

Report to: Policy and Oversight Board

Date: 24/04/2023

Subject: Looking back on the work of the Board in 2022/23

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Responsible Director: Sukvinder Kalsi, Director of Finance

SUMMARY

This report looks back at the achievements of the Policy and Oversight Board in 2022/23. It updates on the major items that the Board has considered, supporting the co-production and development of the Council's emerging Digital Inclusion Strategy and response to the Cost-of-Living (COL) Crisis.

Looking ahead, the report seeks Member approval of the Terms of Reference of the Board for the year ahead and seeks views on key strategic issues within its remit to programme for consideration in 2023/24.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. For the Board to note and comment on the report, including any key strategic issues within its remit to programme for consideration in 2023/24.
2. For the Board to approve its Terms of Reference for the forthcoming municipal year (Appendix 1).

Wards Affected: All

Our Values	Summary of how this report aligns to the H&F Values
Building shared prosperity	The Board scrutinised the Council's response to the COL crisis in 2022/23, including its support to businesses.
Creating a compassionate council	The Board's review of the response to the COL crisis and emerging Digital Inclusion Strategy considered ways to better support residents with additional support needs. This will continue to be a strategic issue for consideration in 2023/24.

Doing things with local residents, not to them	The Board intends to scrutinise co-production at H&F as part of its workplan in 2023/24. The Board supported the co-production of the emerging Digital Inclusion Strategy.
Being ruthlessly financially efficient	The Board scrutinised the Council's revenue budget for 2023/24 and Council finances will continue to be a strategic issue for consideration in the forthcoming year.
Taking pride in H&F	The Board's review of the response to the COL crisis and emerging digital inclusion strategy explored how these policy areas are supporting H&F communities.
Rising to the challenge of the climate and ecological emergency	The scrutiny of the Council's response to the COL crisis in 2022/23 explored support to residents in managing rising energy costs and plans to improve energy efficiency of homes.

Background Papers Used in Preparing This Report

None.

DETAILED ANALYSIS

1. The following sections look back on the work of the Board in 2022/23, including progress of major items it has considered on digital inclusion and the cost-of-living crisis. It also considers the future work programme of the Board and seeks endorsement of the Terms of Reference for the year ahead.

Looking back on 2022/23

2. Full Council agreed to establish the Policy and Oversight Board (the 'Board') in May 2022, with a purpose to oversee the Council's overview and scrutiny function, which is delivered through six Policy and Accountability Committees (PACs). The members of the Board include each of the Chairs of the PACs, who have reported to the Chair on their work and emerging issues for consideration by the Board.
3. The Board met four times in 2022/23. The first meeting in June 2022 agreed its Terms of Reference. The substantive business of the Board was undertaken in subsequent meetings. In September 2022, the Board considered and supported the co-production of the Council's emerging digital inclusion strategy, with contributions from experts in the field. In December 2022, the Board scrutinised the Council's response to the COL crisis, with guests from local advice and partner organisations involved in supporting residents and

businesses through the crisis. Finally in January 2023, the Board scrutinised the Council's revenue budget and council tax levels for 2023/24.

4. The Board's consideration of items has benefitted from the contributions of invited external experts and partners, from the resident Digital Accessibility Group, national and local advice agencies, the community and voluntary sector and business. There have been nine external speakers for the digital inclusion and COL items, providing wider perspectives and challenge on these important policy initiatives. Under the guidance of the Chair of the Board, this has strengthened the Council's approaches and will continue to be a key feature of how the Board will operate going forward.

Developing our Digital Inclusion Strategy

5. The Board provided valuable feedback on the direction of the strategy and reinforced the areas identified as a key focus in coproduction.
6. Work has continued with the Digital Accessibility Group and the draft strategy is currently being developed. This will then go back to the Digital Accessibility Group in May 2023 for their approval and will be presented to the Council's Strategic Leadership Team (SLT) and a future Board meeting.

Working together on the response to the cost-of-living crisis

7. This section of the report outlines progress of key activities in the COL response since December 2022 and how the programme has responded to previous feedback from the Board. It follows the presentation of a more comprehensive paper to December's Board, which sets out the full range of support the Council is providing.
8. The COL crisis remains an urgent priority for the Council, given the significant rise in everyday costs for residents and businesses and the hardship this has created for many. In 2023, inflation¹ has fallen a little from its peak of around 11% at the end of 2022, though the 12-month inflation rate rose again in March 2023 to 10.4%, highlighting continued economic uncertainty and the fastest acceleration of food prices in 45 years. On 23 March 2023, the Bank of England confirmed its 12th consecutive interest rate increase since October 2021 to 4.25%. Although inflation is now forecast to fall faster in 2023 to around 3% by the end of the year, the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) predicts that real household disposable income (the money residents have available to spend) will fall by 2.6% in 2023, on top of a 2.5% fall in 2022.
9. The Council continues to have a wide-ranging and comprehensive response to the crisis. Over the former financial year, and the current 2023/24 financial year, the Council will have a total package of £10m supporting residents through the COL crisis. This is supporting a range of statutory and discretionary support services. H&F will continue to provide a compassionate response to the crisis that recognises the immediate and urgent needs of

¹ All inflation references are to the Consumer Price inflation (CPI) 12-month rate, which is the inflation measure used in the government's target for inflation.

residents and businesses, alongside building resilience to the crisis through innovative support that is both targeted and accessible.

10. At December's meeting, members of the Board, Alliance partners and external speakers provided a range of comments on our COL response. These comments will continue to inform the delivery of support in the coming months. Additionally, there has been progress in the following areas.

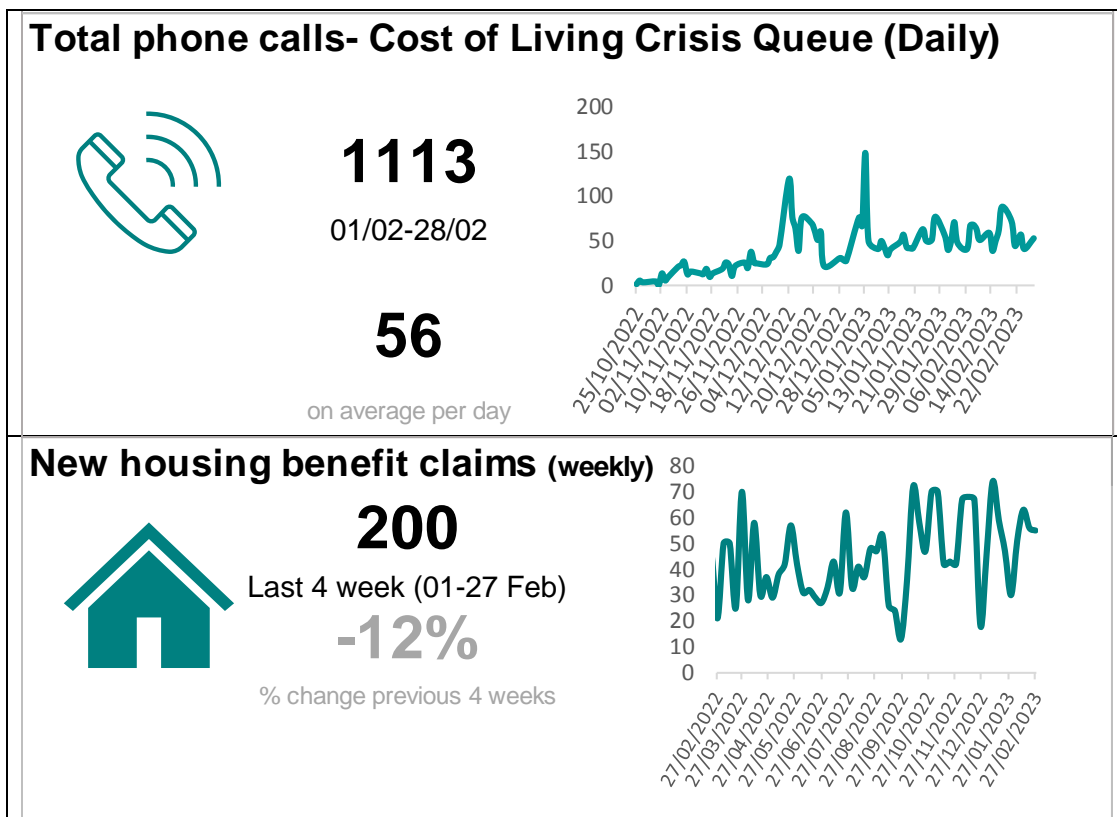
Support to residents in need

11. The Council's dedicated COL Advice team has undertaken assessments with and provided support to over 1,000 residents since the dedicated team was established. One-half of these residents are Council tenants and 80% of all of those helped are claiming benefits, showing that we are being successful in targeting our help to those that need it most.
12. The most common type of help provided by the COL Advice team has been to support residents in making an application for financial support and to provide general advice. Residents are also signposted to apply for support via an external process or to a Council service or external organisation for specialist support. A fast referral system has been put in place with local advice agencies such as Crosslight, Citizens Advice and legal advice provider H&F Law Centre for specialist debt, money management, housing or legal advice.
13. The most common support requested from the COL Advice Team has been concerns about fuel poverty. This includes requests from residents with pre-payment meters for fuel vouchers (worth £49 each), given the rapid rise in energy costs during this crisis. The COL Advice Team and other Council services issued around 750 vouchers across December 2022 to February 2023 (latest available). The Foodbank provided residents with a further 270 fuel vouchers over this period. Collectively, this was worth £51,500 in direct financial support to residents, far in excess of the £41,000 of vouchers issued in the first 11 months of 2022.
14. The next most common support requested has been with food parcels via the Foodbank. Residents have also requested support to claim the government's Council Tax energy rebate and to maximise their income through applications for winter fuel payments, warm home discount, cold weather payment and Council Tax reductions, as well as to access a range of other local support for lower income families. The new benefit calculator (entitledto.co.uk) launched at the end of November 2022 has been used 900 times by residents looking to maximise their income.
15. Council services continue to work to provide agile support to residents by enabling faster decision making and assessments. Examples of this for the latest monthly period (February 2023) include:
 - The COL Advice Team has received or made 4,300 calls since January 2023, with over 1,000 calls in February 2023 (see figure 1) and had the highest month yet in March with 2,000 calls. Residents are able to request call-backs to help them save money. The average time to answer residents'

calls for this period was less than a minute, with the advisors spending on average 7 minutes undertaking assessments with residents.

- Sixty-four payments to residents via the discretionary Local Support Payments (LSP). LSP supports residents on qualifying benefits in an emergency caused by a specific event, usually through furniture, white goods, or store vouchers. £600,000 will be paid in 2022/23, all funded by the Council.
- £630,000 has been allocated so far in 2022/23 via Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) to residents in need because of a shortfall between their benefit entitlement and the rent for their home.
- Processing 200 new claims in February 2023 for housing benefit, a vital benefit for lower income families to help cover housing costs (see Figure 1). We also processed nearly 200 applications for Council Tax Support in the same month, with the Council having a generous scheme with 100% relief for the lowest income households.
- Processing over 100 new claims from low-income families for free school meals and grants for school clothing in February, with almost 5,200 pupils of borough schools now receiving free school meals, the highest level for two years (see Figure 1). In addition, H&F continues to fund universal free breakfasts to all primary school pupils in the borough to help local families combat food insecurity.
- The Foodbank, a key COL Alliance partner and grant-aided by the Council, provided food help to almost 2,000 adults and children in February 2023, the highest number since summer 2021 (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Trends and data on COL support in February 2023



Pupils receiving Free School Meals (Monthly)



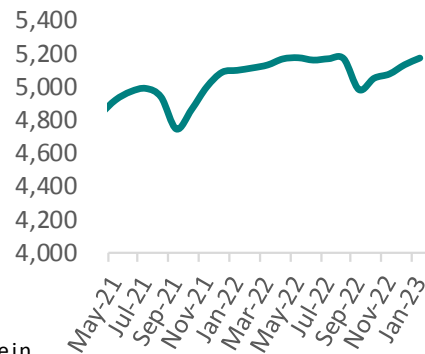
5,178

Feb-23

0.1%

% change last month

Free school meals is an indicator of deprivation among pupils. Note that around a third of pupils attending schools do not live in the borough.



Food Bank Vouchers (Monthly)



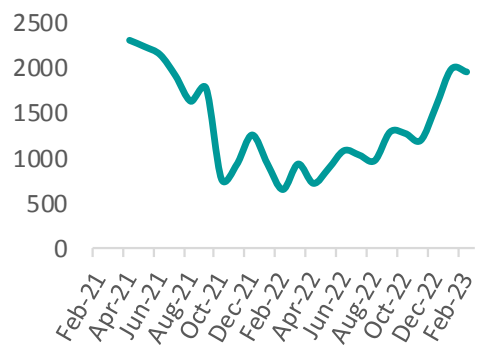
1,971

Feb-23

-1.6%

% change previous month

Number of adults and children in receipt of food bank vouchers so far this year.



- The Council will continue to look for opportunities to streamline applications and processes so that residents in need receive help as quickly as possible.

Digital Exclusion

- The Council has recognised the need to ensure support available to residents is accessible and digitally inclusive. That is why we delivered a sixteen-page COL booklet to every household in the borough in December 2022. An accessible version is available for use with screen readers and an easy read version is available via the COL online hub that residents can request copies of. To support efforts to reach all communities in the borough, it has been widely promoted through partners in the COL Alliance. Hundreds of copies were distributed to local primary, secondary and special schools, community and voluntary organisations and GP practices.
- The COL Advice Team is providing in-person, telephone and online support to residents. The vast majority of their support has been directly with residents, rather than residents' self-serving. Since January 2023, face to face support via the COL Advice Team has been available from the Council's corporate customer services centre at 145 King Street. In-person support had been significantly reduced prior to this during the Covid-19 pandemic and because 145 King Street was used as a vaccination centre. Residents have also been able to receive support from the welcome warm spaces in the borough at Our Lady of Fatima Church, Earls Court Community Hub, Sands End Arts and Community Centre, and Old Oak community centre, as well as at the five local libraries.

19. In December's report, we referred to plans to have COL advice pop-ups in the borough. Four pop-ups were delivered in February and March 2023 at the Livat shopping centre, Hammersmith, and the W12 shopping centre, Shepherds Bush. A vacant retail unit was available at Livat, which allowed the COL Advice Team and Community Health Champions team to be joined by partners Citizens Advice and Crosslight. Both venues had high footfall and the teams directly supported over 240 residents about debt and money management, fuel poverty, Council Tax, disability support, carer queries, housing and general COL advice. Consideration is being given to holding further pop-ups.
20. For those residents and businesses that do wish to access information online, we have established comprehensive online COL support hubs since the start of the crisis. The COL webpages for residents were re-designed and launched in January 2023, and have between 1,250 to 1,850 views per week, providing a comprehensive resource for residents to access the latest advice, help and support in over 100 languages.

COL Alliance

21. As reported in December, a key part of our strategy has been to build a COL Alliance of voluntary sector organisations, businesses and other local organisations and public sector partners, as was done so successfully during the Covid-19 pandemic. The Alliance Partnership reflects a community led, place-based approach, to share resources, expertise and knowledge, all with the ultimate aim of improving the support available for our residents.
22. The successful COL workshop in October and conference in November 2022 has informed the development of the Alliance and its priorities. A core group of partners volunteered to be part of a Steering Group for the Alliance and identified three initial priorities. Task and Finish groups have taken forward this work, exploring:
 - **How to better signpost services and support locally** – This group is exploring how digital tools can improve the sharing of information and signposting of services and expertise between local organisations. Best practice examples are being researched, including those used by other local authorities.
 - **Ways to increase local volunteering** – This group is exploring opportunities to boost the number of volunteers and length of their commitments.
 - **How to better support residents with prepayment meters** – Residents on prepayment meters have been disproportionately impacted by the COL crisis. This group is exploring what more we can do.
23. The work of the Task and Finish Groups is ongoing and will be reported to the Steering Group. Further events for the Alliance are currently being planned for 2023/24, to co-produce the response to the crisis in 2023/24.
24. As well as work under the Alliance, we have also engaged with other local forums and partnerships. This has included discussions on the COL crisis at the Adults Safeguarding Board and amongst health partners across North-West London, which considered the health and well-being impacts from the crisis.

An area where further development will be needed is further listening to the needs of residents as part of our response and co-producing our response, including continuing to work closely with partners that support residents.

Scrutiny of Revenue Budget for 2023/24

25. The revenue budget for 2023/24 was approved at Full Council on 23 February 2023. Following the final Local Government Finance Settlement, which was announced after the publication of the draft revenue budget for H&F, an additional £100k was added to the COL fund to provide further support during the financial year. An updated Medium Term Financial Strategy will be developed throughout the financial year.

Looking forward to 2023/24

26. The Board has the following intended future items:
- 20 June 2023 – Co-production at H&F
 - 11 September 2023 – Intergenerational practices
 - 11 December 2023 – Items to be agreed
 - 23 January 2024 – Revenue Budget for 2023/24.
27. The following areas of collaboration have been identified for the Board's consideration through the latest reports from PAC Chairs to the Chair:
- Improving data sharing and collaboration between the Council and partners
 - The Council providing co-production support and guidance to partners
 - Physical and mental health and wellbeing
 - Air quality and greening
 - Development of a borough food strategy
 - Cost of living support
 - Digital inclusion.
28. Members of the Board are invited to identify any further key strategic issues within its remit to programme for consideration in 2023/24 beyond the items in the above work programme.
29. The work of the Board will continue to be guided by its Terms of Reference. This is included at Appendix 1, with Members asked to endorse the Terms of Reference for the year ahead.

LIST OF APPENDICES

Appendix 1 – Policy and Oversight Board Terms of Reference

Policy and Oversight Board Terms of Reference

Members

8 voting Councillors

Quorum

3 Members of the Committee

Political proportionality

7 Administration Members

1 Opposition Member

Principal Functions

All the powers of an Overview and Scrutiny Committee as set out in section 21 of the Local Government Act 2000 and Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007, and in particular:

- The coordination, and development of the Council's Policy and Scrutiny function and the monitoring of its performance.
- To develop policy and make recommendations to the Cabinet.
- Monitor the administration and spending of Council services.
- To review the impact of decisions and policies implemented by the Council.
- Scrutinising the relevant Cabinet Member(s).

Scope

- Creation and monitoring of new policy development via the Policy and Accountability Committees (PACs).
- Consideration and approval of requests for Task and Finish Groups by the PACs.
- Considering the corporate budget.
- Development of long-term savings plans within the Medium-Term Financial Strategy.
- Oversight of finance and use of resources.
- Performance management (including external assessment of the Authority and its services).
- Managed and shared services and other joint working with outside bodies.
- Electoral and other registration services.
- The Council's communication strategy.
- Procurement and management of IT services.
- The development, implementation and operation of the governance, structure, and processes in respect of joint working with other authorities, save for matters within specific service areas which fall within the remit of the PACs.
- Research, innovation, and the Council's continuous improvement and cultural change agenda.
- All human resources and organisation development functions.
- The Council's customer care and complaints services.
- Corporate Programmes and assurance.
- Other major cross-cutting functions of the Council.