

London Borough of Hammersmith & Fulham

# Policy and Oversight Board Minutes



Wednesday 16 July 2025

## **PRESENT**

### **Committee Members**

Councillors Lisa Homan (Chair), Jacolyn Daly, Natalia Perez, Stala Antoniades, Nicole Trehy, Rory Vaughan, and Jose Afonso

### **Cabinet Members**

Councillor Rowan Ree (Cabinet Member for Finance and Reform)

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

### **Officers**

Matthew Sales (Assistant Director, Programmes, Assurance and Analytics)

James Newman (Assistant Director – Finance and Deputy Section 151 Officer)

Bathsheba Mall (Programme Lead)

Christine Chung (Fuel Poverty and Energy Efficiency Lead)

Joseph Pascual (Service Lead for H&F Supporting Vulnerable Communities)

David Abbott (Head of Governance)

### **Guests**

Louise Wilson (CEO, H&F Giving)

Phil Storey (CEO, H&F Foodbank)

Sarah Lumgair (CEO, People Arise Now)

## **1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Helen Rowbottom.

Apologies for lateness were received from Councillor Stala Antoniades (who entered the meeting at 7.08pm) and Councillor Rebecca Harvey (who entered at 7.15pm).

## **2. DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS**

Councillor Natalia Perez declared a non-pecuniary interest in Item 4 as a Trustee of Hammersmith United Charities.

### **3. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING**

The Chair noted that an update on actions from the previous meeting was attached to the minutes for information.

#### **RESOLVED**

The minutes of the meeting held on 6 May 2025 were agreed as an accurate record.

### **4. COST OF LIVING PROGRESS REPORT**

Matthew Sales (Assistant Director, Programmes, Assurance and Analytics) introduced the item, noting that this was the fourth in a series of reports to the Policy and Oversight Board on H&F's Cost of Living response programme. The report highlighted the Council's continued commitment to supporting residents through economic hardship with a compassionate, data-informed, and financially efficient approach.

Matthew Sales gave a short presentation on the Council's cost of living response. The Board also invited Louise Wilson (CEO, H&F Giving), Phil Storey (CEO, H&F Foodbank), Sarah Lumgair (CEO, People Arise Now), Bathsheba Mall (Programme Lead), Christine Chung (Fuel Poverty and Energy Efficiency Lead), and Joseph Pascual (Service Lead for H&F Supporting Vulnerable Communities) to contribute to the discussion.

Councillor Jacolyn Daly asked what percentage of households in the borough had benefitted from the schemes highlighted in the report. Matthew Sales said there had been 76,000 awards of help delivered to residents across 25 different schemes, some internal, some delivered by external partners. He said there was no single data system across all of the schemes so it would be challenging to know exactly how many households were affected. He noted that the Cost of Living Advice team took 43,000 calls up to March 2025 and had helped 19,000 residents.

Councillor Daly asked if the lack of guaranteed funding from central government in previous years meant there had been less investment in processes and systems than if there had been a clear, longer-term commitment. Matthew Sales said it had. Of the five grants, four had been for just six months which made it difficult to do long-term planning. He welcomed the current Government's one year funding commitment and plans for a new crisis and resilience fund to replace the household support fund, which would give Councils more certainty over funding and more flexibility to decide how best to utilise the money.

Councillor Natalia Perez welcomed the report and thanked the members of the Cost of Living Alliance for their work. She then asked for more information on the Department for Work and Pensions' monitoring visit mentioned in the report. Matthew Sales said the Department for Work and Pensions funded the Household Support Fund. They carried out a routine visit in 2024, looking at the Council's strategy, how grants were administered, and spoke to three of the scheme's leads. After the visit they concluded that, "Compassion is at the heart of (H&F's) approach... Those involved in delivery were passionate about using the fund to

provide the right help for those who needed it, in a well-rounded and thought-through way.”

Councillor Perez asked if there were any recommendations from the visit. Matthew Sales said there were no recommendations and that the visit was more of a quality and assurance check. He noted there was also a wider evaluation commissioned nationally which reported earlier in the year, that was based on Household Support Fund 4 (2023-24). One of the key recommendations was to increase the emphasis on prevention and financial inclusion which was something the Council was looking at through its financial inclusion strategy.

Councillor Stala Antoniadis asked about the take-up of the Healthy Homes initiative, progress made so far, and any future plans. Christine Chung (Fuel Poverty and Energy Efficiency Lead) said the initiative included advice and guidance for residents, going into homes to install energy efficient measures, and helping residents apply for larger measures like heat pumps. She noted 146 households had taken up simple measures so far and 22 households had applied for retrofit grants. She added that the original contract was for 100 homes, but more funding had come online so this was expanding to over 300 households.

Councillor Antoniadis emphasised the importance of clean air to health and asked if part of this work could look at grants for changing gas cookers electric cookers. Christine Chung said this was being considered. They currently provided advice to move away from gas but there weren't grants to support that yet. Councillor Antoniadis encouraged the Council to consider providing grants for this.

**ACTION: Members encouraged officers to look at providing grants to help people move from gas cookers to electric cookers, both for energy efficiency benefits and improvement to air quality**

Councillor Jose Afonso asked if any analysis had been carried out on the impact of changes to the Winter Fuel Allowance on the number of awards given out. Matthew Sales said the Council had put a scheme in place in the last 6 months for pensioners who lost their Winter Fuel Allowance. Vouchers for essential living costs had been distributed to 850 low-income pensioners. He said the Council was considering whether it would be required again this year and welcomed the Government's change in position on the issue.

Councillor Rory Vaughan asked the following questions:

- Were there any local measures of the impact of the Household Support Fund?
- Did any of the schemes involved getting people back into work?
- Regarding crisis funds, were people repeatedly coming back or did the early interventions work?

Louise Wilson (CEO, H&F Giving) noted that H&F Giving partnered with the Council to deliver the Household Support Fund and produced an impact report with a range of measures that was available online. She noted that the funding distributed through partners had reached over 4% of households in the borough. Decisions on which organisations to give funding to were made by a panel of community representatives who knew the borough well and could objectively identify where it was most needed.

They would visit the organisations to gather data on their work, backed up by case studies that brought the impact to life. She noted they had data showing just over 20% of the support went to pensioners. She added that if Councillors were interested in the data, it could be made available.

Councillor Vaughan asked if there were any preventative interventions that had been identified as most effective. Matthew Sales highlighted the Healthy Homes programme that could tackle fuel poverty by helping to get residents access to grants and shift behaviour. He also noted the Food Action Plan, Financial Inclusion Strategy, and Homelessness Prevention work that the Council was doing.

Joseph Pascual discussed homelessness prevention further – noting that the Council had software that detected signs that people were in danger of falling into rent arrears which allowed officers to see what help could be deployed. He said it was far more cost effective to help people before they reached crisis point.

Councillor Nicole Trehy thanked officers and partners for the report and welcomed the plethora of measures that were supporting so many residents.

The Chair asked about the criteria for the retrofitting grants to homes. Christine Chung said the eco and warm homes social housing grants were targeted at household incomes of £36k and below and people with health conditions. Other grants were available for people who were defined as fuel poor, but there was no set income limit.

Councillor Rebecca Harvey (Cabinet Member for Social Inclusion and Community Safety) addressed the Board and thanked officers and partners for their hard work. She highlighted the importance of preventative measures like fuel vouchers and the hardship fund that could help people in need early on and avoid more expensive, complex support in the future. She also highlighted some of the other initiatives the Council had put in place to help people, including the council tax support scheme and support for care leavers. She noted that 70 organisations attended Cost of Living Alliance steering group meetings and praised them for their hard work and dedication to helping people in the borough.

The Chair asked the partnership representatives how the Alliance and its work had developed since the last meeting. Phil Storey (CEO, H&F Foodbank) said the foodbank was feeding around 2500 people per month, noting that figure had not increased this winter due to the preventative work being done. He highlighted Community Compass, a website designed by the Alliance to connect agencies together and help people find the support they needed. They had secured funding recently to train frontline workers to speak to people at an early stage and use Community Compass to find help.

Sarah Lumgair (CEO, People Arise Now) said her organisation had started working with the family members of offenders then moved on to preventative work to tackle the root causes of crime and offer opportunities to young people. She said it was a privilege to be on the Cost of Living Alliance steering committee. She noted that, after a number of conversations with White City families about the economic growth and regeneration in the area not benefitting the people who lived there, she was able

to speak with the Council about improving corporate social responsibility which led to commitments from businesses to provide jobs and high-quality work experience placements for local people.

Louise Wilson (CEO, H&F Giving) noted that H&F Giving was part of a network called London Giving and they had a role in connecting the community to ensure resources went to those who needed it and also a role in unlocking funding. They knew the challenges that community organisations faced and were striving to help them get longer term sustainable support in place.

Councillor Daly noted that the foodbank was one of the first steps on the road to crisis and asked how many clients needed one off interventions at that early stage. Phil Storey said the foodbank worked on a referral basis so people coming to them had already engaged with another agency. He said 66% of people only needed one to three vouchers. And everyone who came to the foodbank was connected with the Citizens Advice Bureau to get advice and try and fix the root of the problem. The foodbank was funded through 3SIF and provided wrap-around support on the White City estate. He noted that they also received Family Trust funding for client support, which was vital for certain complex cases, for example, accompanying people to key appointments.

Councillor Daly asked what level of cash-first initiatives would help keep people from needing the foodbank. Phil Storey suggested supermarket vouchers of around £30–£50 could help the 66% of people who only attended a handful of times. Councillor Daly asked that the recommendation be considered.

**ACTION: Cllr Daly suggested looking at providing small cash transfers or supermarket vouchers (£30–£50) to avoid referrals to the foodbank**

Councillor Perez asked how referrals to the foodbank worked. She also asked what happened to people who were not aware of the referring services. Sarah Lumgair explained that most of their work was advocacy work. They carried out initial consultations, spending time to understand the issues people faced.

Councillor Perez asked if people were given access to mental health support. Sarah Lumgair said SOBUS ran a mental health equity group that they could tap into, depending on the level of support required.

The Chair asked if health agencies were engaged with the Alliance, and if those links needed to be strengthened. Matthew Sales said there were strong links in place and the Alliance included NHS and Healthwatch representatives.

Councillor Harvey addressed the Board and made the following points:

- The Council had been looking at how to bring together services for a comprehensive training plan and take that to partners.
- The advice team had taken thousands of calls offering help and support to residents.
- Tens of thousands of advice booklets had been delivered across the borough, including in libraries, schools, and GP offices.

- The Council had invested £1m in advice services and just under £1m in third sector partners.
- She highlighted the success of Community Compass as an example of effective partnership working.
- The Council was looking at innovate new projects to address poverty in the north of the borough.
- She suggested referring people to the foodbank was quicker and likely more effective than offering a supermarket voucher.

The Chair thanked officers and partners for attending and contributing to the discussion. The Chair also thanked the Alliance for the work they had done, noting they could deliver more collectively than as individual services.

The Chair noted that the Council's cost of living work linked into a number of the Council's key strategies and suggested the PACs and the Board should look at some of the strategies and their impact in more details at future meetings.

**ACTION: The Board and PACs to look at the Council's strategies at future meetings**

## **RESOLVED**

1. That the Policy and Oversight Board note the report and provide comments and feedback on H&F's response to the COL crisis.

## **5. FINANCE PEER CHALLENGE FINDINGS**

James Newman (Assistant Director – Finance and Deputy Section 151 Officer) introduced the report which set out the findings of the Finance Peer Challenge conducted in April 2025. He then gave a presentation on the feedback from the Peer Challenge team. He noted the Peer Challenge had been carried out by a team of highly experienced elected members and senior officers from other authorities. The review covered the following elements: financial leadership, financial strategy, planning and forecasting, decision-making, financial outcomes, and partnership and innovation.

The Peer Challenge found that the Council:

- had highly visible and effective political and officer leadership;
- was ambitious and financially well-run, that the organisation's financial track-record had enabled investment in clear political priorities;
- had a strong track-record in commissioning and contract managing external services;
- demonstrated leadership and effective working with public and private sector partners, including on economic growth, and had important lessons for the wider sector; and
- contained some differing perceptions of its transformation approach and activity, which could be better articulated across the organisation.

Councillor Rowan Ree (Cabinet Member for Finance and Reform) addressed the Board and noted that the Council valued the opportunity to hear from the experts in

the peer review team. He said the Council was open to challenge and fresh perspectives. He noted that news about local government finances was often negative and he hoped that this review helped reassure residents that H&F's finances were well managed. He thanked everyone who was involved in the review process for their time and hard work.

Councillor Rory Vaughan congratulated members and officers on the outcome of the peer review. He said the positive feedback from experts in the field was very encouraging. He then asked the following questions:

- How was the action plan put together?
- How does this fit into the Council's transformation agenda?
- How does this feed into the budget process for next year?

James Newman, noted that the action plan was available in the pack. Regarding the transformation agenda, he said officers were looking at how to incorporate this into existing structures and create capacity within existing functions. The Chair noted that a report on the Council's transformation work would be coming to a future meeting.

Councillor Rory Vaughan asked that consideration be given to general finance training for scrutiny members ahead of the budget scrutiny in the Autumn to help them understand the process. James Newman said officers had looked at arranging audit training through CIPFA and noted the LGA also had good resources for members.

Councillor Stala Antoniadis asked if officers had looked at other boroughs regarding transformation and what the key lessons were. James Newman said officers had looked at other councils' transformation journeys. They had recently participated in a transformation workshop with Ealing and Greenwich where they discussed how they set up teams, central functions vs devolved functions, culture change, and how to build capacity to deliver change.

Matthew Sales said the Council had a long record of transformation and highlighted the Resident Engagement and Access Programme (REAP) and the housing improvement programme. Officers working on those programmes engaged with other councils to see what worked and how to apply those lessons locally.

The Chair asked for details on the elements of the Peer Challenge related to commissioned services and contract management. James Newman said officers were not party to all of the conversations the reviewers had undertaken, but the reviewers were given key documents such as the Council's sourcing strategy and spoke with officers and providers.

Councillor Jose Afonso asked when the tailored training programme for members would be available. Councillor Rowan Ree said there was a rolling training programme, and it had proven useful so far. The Chair agreed, noting she had recently attended a good audit training session. Members suggested scrutiny training should be part of the member induction programme.

**ACTION: Members suggested scrutiny training be included in the member induction programme**

Councillor Rowan Ree said members and officers would implement the action plan and track progress closely. He said the Council would always look to find the most efficient ways to provide high quality services for residents. This review and the action plan was a step on that journey but not the end.

The Chair thanked members and officers for their contributions. She said the Board would monitor the recommendations in the review and will follow-up with reports on the Council's transformation programme at future meeting. She highlighted the following recommendations made by the Board:

- To arrange budget training for members ahead of the budget scrutiny meetings.
- To include scrutiny training as part of the Council's member induction programme.

## **RESOLVED**

1. That the Board noted the overview presentation and final report at Appendices 1 and 2 of the Local Government Association Finance Peer Challenge of H&F.
2. That the Board considered the action plan at Appendix 3 to support the implementation of the recommendations, the delivery of which will be monitored by the Policy and Oversight Board.

## **6. WORK PROGRAMME**

The Board's draft work programme was presented for discussion and noting.

## **RESOLVED**

1. The Board noted the draft work programme.

## **7. DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS**

The following dates of future meetings were noted:

- 17 September 2025
- 24 November 2025
- 4 February 2026
- 29 April 2026

Meeting started: 7.00 pm  
Meeting ended: 8.42 pm



Chair .....

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