

Economic Regeneration, Housing and the Arts Policy and Accountability Committee Minutes

Wednesday 26 April 2017

PRESENT

Committee members: Councillors Daryl Brown, Adam Connell, Alan De'Ath (Chair) and Lucy Ivimy

Other Councillors: Andrew Jones and Sue Fennimore

Officers: Nilavra Mukerji - Director of Housing Services, Andy Stocker - Service Transformation Manager in Housing Services, Joseph Pascual – H&F Link and Support Manager, Glendine Shepherd – Head of Housing Solutions

Partners: Jaya Lalwani - Training Supervisor and Digital Inclusion Coordinator at Citizens Advice Hammersmith and Fulham

44. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Harry Phibbs and Councillor Lisa Homan, Cabinet Member for Housing.

45. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

46. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 7 March 2017 were agreed to be accurate.

47. DIGITAL INCLUSION – HOUSING SERVICES

Andy Stocker explained that digital inclusion meant helping people to benefit from the internet, through access to information, better deals and increased contact with friends and family. It was estimated that 12% of the borough's population could not access the internet; for residents living in Council houses this figure rose to 30% and so schemes to improve digital inclusion on housing estates had been set up.

Digital inclusion schemes had been piloted on the Queen Caroline Estate and at Waterhouse Close Sheltered Accommodation. These schemes involved grants being provided for a broadband connection and IT equipment and training sessions then being offered in residents' halls. Training sessions had been delivered by Council officers, volunteers, staff of Bishop Creighton House and even school children as part of the Council's youth takeover day. The support offered was tailored to each person attending, although everyone left the session with an email address. So far more than 40 residents had been given training on how to use the internet.

Andy Stocker said that there was significant demand for digital inclusion services in sheltered accommodation. He explained that the current service model was not able to deliver training in all 47 of the residents halls in the borough, but that a model based on hub venues in each area of the borough would be possible. This idea would be dependent on both additional funding being identified, possibly through crowdfunding on Spacehive, and on more volunteers being recruited.

Jaya Lalwani explained that Citizens Advice Hammersmith and Fulham delivered training at Avonmore Library and at the Advice Centre in Shepherds Bush through its TechTalk scheme. Digitally themed coffee mornings were also arranged which helped people to improve their skills. The service had 30 digital champions and also promoted online training through learnmyway.com. Some learners were now so confident using computers that they were training others.

A resident said that they were pleased to hear that digital inclusion was being promoted but that the service needed to be rolled out further as many, especially those living in the south of the borough, couldn't access the training. Andy Stocker explained that a trial had been planned on an estate in Fulham but that the TRA had not been able to commit to doing what was needed of it to launch the scheme. He said that he hoped that the service could benefit all residents in time.

A resident said that the knowledge and attitude of the member of staff giving the training was important to the scheme's success; an early trainer at one of the schemes had not been well liked by learners and this had led to people not wanting to attend. Andy Stocker said that a lot had been learned from pilots, including the need for friendly trainers.

Councillor Connell said that he was surprised by the high proportion of people who did not access the internet and asked what was done to help those who

did not live in council housing. Andy Stocker explained that residents not able to access the housing run schemes were signposted to voluntary sector organisations which the council funded to provide this type of training. Councillor Fennimore explained that improving digital inclusion was an important part of tackling loneliness and isolation and that the Health, Adult Social Care and Social Inclusion Policy and Accountability Committee had already reviewed the Council's progress on the issue. The Poverty and Worklessness Commission recommendations would also help the Council to promote digital inclusion.

A resident said that digital inclusion needed to be addressed by national government. The Chair suggested that the Council could lobby the government to ask them to focus on improving digital inclusion. Councillor Fennimore said that it was already a government priority but that more pressure might persuade the government to fund more schemes.

Nilavra Mukerji explained that government was already doing some work to encourage businesses to help people to use the internet. Councillor Jones said that the Council also felt that getting businesses to engage residents in the digital world was an important way to increase digital inclusion. A resident said that businesses would always be interested in how they could profit from providing such training but that so long as residents remembered this their help in learning about computers and the internet could be very useful.

The Chair noted that many parents might be concerned about their children's ability to access inappropriate material online and asked whether this fear was used to help make residents more digitally aware. Jaya Lalwani said that talks were run in conjunction with primary schools which covered online safety. Councillor Fennimore said that Age UK ran very good intergenerational digital inclusion projects elsewhere in the country which could be looked at for delivery in Hammersmith and Fulham.

A resident said that the TRA at Waterhouse Close wanted to install wifi across the building at a low cost per resident. He explained that the Council had prevented the work from going ahead and asked why this was. Andy Stocker said that in principle the Council supported the scheme, however, permission from the Council as the owner of the building had not been sought for the works and so their potential impact had not been assessed. The works had been stopped pending that assessment which was ongoing, and consultation with residents to check that they were happy with the proposal. Councillor Ivimy said that it was also important that a shared network was properly secured.

The Chair thanked residents for sharing their experiences and officers and others for their work to help people use technology to their advantage.

48. TACKLING WORKLESSNESS

Glendine Shepherd explained that the government's welfare reforms had been aimed at making work pay. The impact of welfare reform on

unemployed households was significant and so the council had taken steps to help people into work.

The key welfare reforms were the introduction of the benefit cap and combination of previous benefits into Universal Credit. The benefit cap had reduced housing benefit for 1335 families in the borough. 65% of those households which had been capped were no longer seeing their benefit reduced, either because they had been helped into work and so eligible to collect working tax credit (480 households) or because they had been exempted from the cap because of disability or because they had moved to cheaper accommodation. Universal Credit mainly affected new applicants and this had been rolled out in most of the borough; officers had worked with Jobcentre Plus to develop an effective system of managing applications to reduce the impact of the new system. Universal Credit's earning's taper allowed people to work unlimited hours and still claim so it was easier to encourage people to seek work.

The schemes which the Council ran to help people into work included:

- H&F Link and Support which runs the H&F Advice Hub, located at 145 King Street, where residents could get advice and assistance on a wide range of subjects. Support was provided by Hammersmith Jobcentre Plus, WorkZone, OnePlace and Adult Learning and Skills.
- WorkZone which helped residents into work and training and helped business with recruitment.
- OnePlace which brought together staff from a range of council services, Jobcentre Plus and other agencies to provide support for those who were long-term unemployed, vulnerable or who had complex needs.

A resident asked whether internships and apprenticeships were available through the council's schemes. Joseph Pascual explained that WorkZone provided apprenticeships, whilst the council also offered people the chance to do an apprenticeship or some work experience at the council.

The Chair asked whether pastoral support was available for people who had been out of work for a long time. Joseph Pascual said that it was, those who had been out of work for a long time were given an action plan including tailored support which could include a range of pastoral schemes.

A resident asked whether the gender and age of those accessing services were monitored. Glendine Shepherd confirmed that these statistics were recorded and services were adjusted to ensure that they met the needs of all communities.

Councillor Connell noted that Hammersmith Jobcentre Plus was due to close and asked what impact this would have. Glendine Shepherd explained that some Jobcentre Plus staff would relocate to 145 King Street but that there would be an impact. Officers were trying to make sure that the required support was made available by Jobcentre Plus.

Councillor Connell noted that the government had removed the duty to monitor income based child poverty as it introduced the benefit cap. He asked whether the council's records allowed officers to assess the impact of the cap on children. Joseph Pascual explained that officers monitored the number of children affected by the cap and worked closely with other agencies to mitigate the impact of the benefit cap on them. Councillor Connell asked that the figures for the number of children affected by the benefit cap be shared with him.

Councillor Connell asked whether the lessons learned from the roll out of Universal Credit had been passed on to government. Joseph Pascual explained that officers met with staff at the Department for Work and Pensions regularly; at these meetings officers explained any issues which had been encountered and were frank about the impact of any problems. The Department for Work and Pensions seemed to take the council's concerns seriously and some improvements had been made to processes. Glendine Shepherd explained that the biggest problem with Universal Credit was that claimants were not paid their first benefit for 6 weeks.

A resident asked what support was made available to those who were managing their rent for the first time. Joseph Pascual explained that officers would help residents to understand tenancies and resolve issues with the payment of benefits to allow residents to pay their rent; if someone was struggling to pay rent then the Council could ask the Department for Work and Pensions to put in an 'Alternative Payment Arrangement' which would see housing benefit paid straight to the landlord. Councillor Fennimore noted that Hammersmith and Fulham's 'Trusted Partner' status meant that it was easier for officers to arrange 'Alternative Payment Arrangements' where it was necessary.

Glendine Shepherd said that when Universal Credit had first been introduced it had been very much a one size fits all system. This had caused problems for many but the Department for Work and Pensions had made changes and the Council had influenced this change.

Councillor Ivimy commended officers for their efforts in trying to get people back into work and for building an effective relationship with the Department for Work and Pensions.

49. REVIEW OF ADULT LEARNING'S RECENT OFSTED INSPECTION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Eamon Scanlon explained that the Adult Learning and Skills Service was based at the Macbeth Centre, with outreach at the Adult and Community Learning Centre at Arc Swift Primary Academy and at Normand Croft Community Centre. 7,000 students attended courses each year.

In November 2016 the Adult Learning and Skills Service had been inspected by Ofsted; the service had been rated good with some outstanding features. The Skills Funding Agency had agreed to continue to fund courses, with £2.7 million being paid in 2016-17. Some of the highlights of the report were

courses designed to support employment needs, social benefits of courses, the services' leadership and the safeguarding and prevent training received by staff.

The inspection had also highlighted a number of areas for improvement. These were being acted upon, as follows:

- Recruit a mathematics teacher so that more classes could be run.
Recruitment of a maths teacher was ongoing.
- Routinely scrutinise plans to improve outcomes for those taking basic qualifications in English, Maths and ESOL
Officers were addressing issues with poor performance by some learners and with high dropout rates. This was being done by assessing learner's abilities better and ensuring that they were supported through their courses.
- Review data to ensure that new learners are participating
Officers had worked with the business intelligence team to get weekly reports which helped them to ensure that courses were performing well and engaging learners.
- Ensure that learners' progress and achievement are recorded and recognised
The requirements of the existing scheme had been publicised whilst possible improvements were being considered.

Eamon Scanlon said that Ofsted's recommendations had been useful in identifying areas where the service could be improved; they had been fed in to the service's Quality Development and Improvement Plan and they would all be acted upon.

The Chair congratulated the service and all of the staff in it for achieving a good rating. Residents said that they felt that the service was good and were pleased that it had been officially recognised.

Councillor Connell noted that PREVENT training was very important and asked whether staff were trained to recognise far-right extremism. Eamon Scanlon said that nationally developed courses had been attended by staff and that this had been very broad, covering all types of extremism, including training on far-right groups and ideologies. Councillor Fennimore said that the ability to identify far-right extremism had become more important since the Brexit vote as there had been a surge in activity. Councillor Ivimy asked whether any significant issues had arisen in the borough. Eamon Scanlon said that there had been 1 PREVENT issue reported by the service, although the person had lived outside of the borough. The service had been told that it had responded to the issue effectively.

50. WEST LONDON AREA REVIEW OF ADULT COMMUNITY LEARNING

Eamon Scanlon explained that funding for Adult Learning and Skills was likely to be devolved to the Mayor of London and then to sub-regions. Hammersmith and Fulham was part of the West London sub-region. It was possible that the service would lose funding as a result of these arrangements; officers were working to mitigate the impact of any changes on

learners. A task and finish group had agreed eight principles for the future provision of Adult Community Learning in West London.

A resident asked whether the council could do anything to ensure that learners did not suffer as a result of the devolution of funding. Eamon Scanlon explained that holding the area review was important as it guaranteed that learners would be engaged in the development of any proposed changes; negotiations with London Councils about funding would also be critical to ensuring that the service remained good.

51. DATE OF THE NEXT MEETING AND WORK PROGRAMME

A resident asked that an item on Sheltered Accommodation be brought to the PAC. It was noted that the PAC had considered an item on Sheltered Accommodation in September 2016 and that it was probably therefore too soon to bring another item on the topic.

Meeting started: 7.00 pm
Meeting ended: 8.55 pm

Chair

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