

Overview & Scrutiny Committee

MINUTES of the OPEN section of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee held on Monday 5 December 2022 at 7.00 pm at 160 Tooley Street, SE1 2QH

PRESENT: Councillor Ian Wingfield (Chair)
Councillor Irina Von Wiese (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Suzanne Abachor
Councillor Ellie Cumbo
Councillor Laura Johnson
Councillor Sunny Lambe
Councillor Margy Newens
Councillor Jason Ochere
Councillor Leo Pollak
Martin Brecknell (Co-opted Member)
Marcin Jagodzinski (Co-opted Member)

OTHER MEMBERS PRESENT: Councillor Stephanie Cryan, Cabinet Member for Communities, Equalities and Finance

OFFICER SUPPORT: Everton Roberts, Head of Scrutiny
Allan Wells, Specialist Governance Lawyer

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Victor Chamberlain and Jon Hartley.

2. NOTIFICATION OF ANY ITEMS OF BUSINESS WHICH THE CHAIR DEEMS URGENT

There were no late items.

3. DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS AND DISPENSATIONS

There were no disclosures of interests or dispensations.

4. MINUTES

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 12 October 2022 be approved as a correct record.

5. COST OF LIVING CRISIS

The committee heard from Steve Hedger, Chair of the East Dulwich Tenants and Residents Association, speaking in connection to the Albrighton Community Fridge, Sophie Wellings, Chief Executive, Link Age Southwark, Ross Diamond, Chief Executive Officer, Age UK Lewisham and Southwark and Chris Green, Chief Executive, and Tim Clarke, Citizens Advice Southwark. The committee also received an update from Councillor Stephanie Cryan, Cabinet Member for Communities, Equalities and Finance, and Dominic Cain, Director of Exchequer.

The following key points were highlighted by the respective organisation representatives:

Steve Hedger explained that the Albrighton Community Fridge was introduced to the Albrighton Community Centre following a concept introduced to the UK by Environmental charity Hubbub.

The Albrighton Community Fridge was the first of 500 community fridges across the country and were started as a means to reduce food waste, predominately from supermarkets, but also from the wider food trade as a whole. Food passed onto community fridges was generally either past its 'best before' date, but edible or had damaged packaging and not able to be sold.

Key points

- Key ethos is to provide food to people who are unable to afford it.
- Food provided for over a thousand people in a week.
- 150 collections would be made from food stores.
- Substantial food donations received from individuals, community groups, schools and businesses.
- Estimated that this Christmas 1 in 5 people will need to access food from foodbanks over the holiday period.
- The situation has got worse since addressing council assembly in July, with a slow progression of people reaching the point of not being able to support themselves.
- Seeing over a prolonged period increasing number of people coming to the community fridge as other household bills are increasing.
- Concern - no surety over supply of food but will still have an increasing number of people coming who are completely reliant on the Fridge to supply them with food.

- Provide open access to food - no requirement to provide proof of benefits or restrictions on number of times an individual can come, and no requirement to live in a particular catchment area. Picking up people from outside the local area who can't get access to food from other places.
- Large influx of refugees, drawing substantial resource which is not being replenished from anywhere else.
- More robust system needed for providing food.
- Many T and RA's across the borough would like to help, but would need some support.
- The more community fridges set up in the borough, the less distance people would have to travel, and the more places people would have to go get food (if a particular community fridge is running short).
- There was a need to look at opening up more places that people can access food, and resourcing those places better.
- Strategic approach needed.

Questions and discussion took place around the following areas:

- Particular items that are in short supply
- Collection mechanism and respecting other community fridge boundaries.
- Challenges for people who cannot afford gas and electricity – unable to prepare meals for family.
- Areas where the council might be able to help/assist
- Changing demographic of people accessing the community fridge.
- Certainty of supply, and the brokering of a framework agreement with supermarkets
- Mentoring T&RAs to start their own community fridges.

The committee then heard from Ross Diamond Age UK Lewisham and Southwark and Sophie Wellings, Link Age Southwark.

Ross Diamond, informed the committee of the impact of the cost of living crisis on older people, particularly older people living in London. Ross highlighted the following:

- Research showed that 25% of older Londoners live in poverty, compared to just 18% in the rest of the country.
- Older Londoners are 50% more likely to be experiencing food insecurity than those in the rest of England.
- 44% of older Londoners living in social housing are in poverty.
- 20% of Londoners over fifty are living in fuel poverty, compared to 15% of the rest of England.

Ross also informed the committee that Age UK Lewisham and Southwark were seeing a much higher than usual request for support, particularly around food provision, and also with income maximisation, and was ensuring that people are getting all the benefits they are entitled to. People who could not afford to socialise

found it more valuable to go to a community space where there were activities and entertainment that could be accessed cheaply or for free.

The local response was largely through COPSINS (Consortium of Old People's Services in Southwark) a contract funded by the council (Ageing Well Southwark). This included provision of advice for the 60 plus to make sure they got the benefits they are entitled to, befriending, exercise classes, IT classes and a shared central hub where Age UK staff and council staff answered calls from older people, making sure that they were connected to council services, and services provided by AGE UK, the COPSINS, and wider voluntary sector.

A series of campaigns had been undertaken with the council's finance services and Citizens Advice Southwark around pension credit – it was reported that this was a widely under claimed benefit. Of particular importance around this was that the government's additional payments for older people would be through the pension credit. The number of people claiming pension credit had risen.

Age UK had also been working with the council around its cost of living fund, with the council enabling voluntary organisations, TRAs, and Age UK to refer vulnerable people who would not otherwise qualify, to the Southwark Cost of Living Fund. Individuals who qualified would receive a voucher for £100 redeemable for cash at post offices.

Age UK were now working on a range of Warm Spaces in Southwark. The Warm Spaces initiative, was a way of opening up spaces across the borough where people (particularly older people) could spend the day somewhere warm and avoid having to use their own heating, and also costs associated with cooking.

Southwark libraries were now formally dedicated warm spaces, along with cultural institutions such as Tate Modern. Small grants had also been given to a range of voluntary groups across the borough, with a view to ensuring a good geographical spread, offering a range of different opening hours and offers. TRAs were also hoping to access Southwark GIG Grants to establish Warm Spaces for their members. A map on the council website showed where all the services were and what was on offer at each of them. A publicity campaign had been launched in the previous week, and publicity would continue.

Monitoring was very light touch, but was supported by a designated council officer who was in contact with some of the groups regularly. Based on 9 services – they had seen 468 people, 147 aged 55+, 194 were from BAME communities, 140 weren't known to the voluntary sector.

Age UK would be reaching out to all communities in the borough, and would take steps to address if found to be underserving particular communities, or parts of the borough.

Age UK received £10,000 for, Warm Bags, to go to people who would struggle to get to the Warm Spaces (people who are housebound or have other difficulties).

They had a minimum of 1,000 bags which will contain:

- Wheatpacks – microwaveable safe alternatives to hot water bottles
- Socks
- Gloves
- Thermal cups – microwavable
- Cotton bags with AUKLS logo
- Hot chocolate sachets
- Activity packs
- AUKLS Calendars
- Library services leaflet
- Falls prevention leaflet
- Thermometer cards
- Winter Wrapped Up leaflet
- Information on the Ageing Well Southwark service that can help link older people and their carers to a wide range of other services and sources of support

It was reported that around 700 bags had been requested so far for COPSINS partners and others providing warm spaces, voluntary groups, the home library services, and the Council's Finance Team.

Following the presentation, questions and discussion took place around the following areas:

- Older people and access/use of technology.
- Under claiming of pension credits, and difficulty in applying.
- Utilising Warm Spaces for sharing information and encouraging take up of Covid and flu vaccination.
- Shortage of older people's housing, and challenges with housing costs.
- The potential increase in damp due to affordability of heating homes and impact on older people with health conditions.

The committee then heard from Chris Green, Chief Executive of Citizens Advice Southwark.

Chris Green informed the meeting that Citizens Advice Southwark were at the forefront of dealing with people's financial worries and in a good position to see the impact of the ongoing cost of living crisis.

Chris advised that since July, debt enquiries had continued to rise, notably around fuel debt, council tax arrears and rent arrears of council tenants. The most significant trend was the increase in enquiries relating to energy. In 2021 this was 2% of enquiries, this year it had risen to over 30%, which was in the top three enquiries, only now behind benefits, and housing issues. Enquiries relating to housing issues were also steadily increasing, and within this, enquiries linked to homelessness were increasing which was another extension of the cost of living

crisis as people fell into rent arrears and faced eviction.

There was also a significant number of people seeking help in relation to disrepair, both with the council and the private rented sector. Research had been undertaken in August 2022 around the experience of people renting privately in respect of the issues they are facing (250 respondents). The single most common problem cited was affordability, followed by disrepair, with 35% of respondents reporting having problems with mould, damp, heating and hot water. 25% of respondents reported having problems with leaks and drains.

The cost of heating was an increasing challenge for many people. In terms of welfare benefits, the number of disability benefit enquiries remained high, 450 Personal Independence Payment (PIP) enquiries a month, and attendance allowance issues increasing significantly, up from 61 in June 2022 to 106 in October 2022.

The Committee then heard from Tim Clarke. Tim informed the committee that attendance at their last two cost of living support roadshows had significantly increased, which was a sign of financial distress amongst the local communities. The roadshows involved a number of partners working together to help people with concerns around money. At the last roadshow Citizens Advice Southwark and the council provided eight staff each, and they were also joined by staff from the Latin American Women's Rights Service, Spring Community Hub, Pecan, Age UK Southwark, Southwark Works and the DWP. The events were also a gateway for financial support that is available, such as the council's cost of living fund, and vouchers for people with prepayment metres.

Before the pandemic CAS would routinely help around 20 to 25 people at these events. 16 people attend the event held in early July, the event in September 52 people were helped over a three hour period. At the event held in November 115 people queued for their help. Of the people who attended, 88% stated that they required advice because they had no money, were in debt, required financial support or wanting help with energy costs.

CAS was looking to combine the events in future with flu and covid vaccinations. They felt there was a real link between health and wellbeing related issues and money issues which they were looking to explore.

They were also working with the council to develop new projects that will target people that are most affected by the cost of living crisis. That would include the Southwark Energy Advice Service, which was launching in the week and would provide targeted advice for people experiencing fuel poverty. There was also a new immigration advice service, which was due to be launching soon, which would target refugees, asylum seekers and other vulnerable migrants. They would also be working with Southwark Day Centre for Asylum Seekers to deliver that service. Data showed that vulnerable migrants were a group disproportionately affected by the cost of living crisis. There was also the Private Renter Support Project funded by the council, which was creating a support organisation for vulnerable private

renters in the borough. It had a new website launched over the previous week. There was also a new 2 year project funded by United St Saviour's Charity, which would provide advice on benefits, debt and housing in Southwark, foodbanks. People attending foodbanks were identified as a group that was disproportionately affected by the cost of living crisis. They would be working with a number of partners on the project including, Albrighton Community Fridge, PECAN, Spring Community Hub, and the Borough Food Cooperative.

At the end of Chris and Tim's opening comments, questions and discussion took place around the following areas:

- The number of people and demographic benefiting from the service annually.
- Funding of Citizens Advice.
- Combining vaccination outreach with the roadshows.

The committee then heard from Chris Williamson, Head of Health and Wellbeing, Public Health.

Chris informed the committee, that there were around 50,000 adults in the borough experiencing some kind of mental disorder such as anxiety and depression. He explained that some people had a genetic predisposition to mental health disorders. The driver for mental ill health could also be social factors, such as housing, employment, and the cost of living, leading to the development of poor mental health or exacerbate existing mental health conditions. Chris then gave a presentation on the cost of living crisis and the impact on mental health and wellbeing [available on the council website].

Chris touched on the following:

- Increase in energy prices and food across the country.
- Households with limited budgets having limited scope to reduce their consumption due to price inflation being on essential goods (food and heating etc.).
- Support available nationally and locally will mitigate some of these impacts but will not remove them in their entirety.
- Increase in people unable to afford a healthy diet, also increase in people cutting back on the number of meals, in some case going without food during the day, particularly some residents with families. Food insecurity was a driver of stigma and social isolation for many residents. Research undertaken from northwest of England pointing to the impact through to physical and mental distress on people experiencing food insecurity
- Transport poverty, with rising cost of fuel for people who have to travel by car – impact on access to employment, health care, food, friends and family, driving an increase in social isolation for those residents.
- 2019 study highlighted that 15% of respondents could not afford to keep their homes warm enough. Impact of a cold home on health and wellbeing fairly significant, particularly for older residents. Increase in cardiovascular

and respiratory illnesses as a result of cold home.

- Rise in debt and financial stress as a result of cost of living crisis – significant impact on mental health.
- Evidence through Previous financial crisis highlighted link between financial distress and increase in suicides/ suicidal attempts and thoughts. Local data locally not showing this, but is of concern.
- Housing instability – research undertaken by Crisis earlier in the year suggests that there will be an increase in homelessness. Estimated increase of around a third across the country. Being driven by cost of living crisis but also the removal of the eviction ban.
- Impact of cost of living on children and young people – wide variety of research from a range of agencies looking at the impact on children. Half of young people in England highlighted the cost of living as a major worry and concern for them specifically.
- Research also highlighted that a third of parents were concerned about the impact of the cost of living crisis on their children’s mental health and wellbeing.
- The council was working closely with colleagues across the system. Very rapidly changing situation.
- Cost of living crisis coming straight after the covid pandemic.
- Groups of particular note are those on low incomes, but not in receipt of universal credits or other financial support. Areas around Faraday, Old Kent Road and Peckham ward are where the greatest numbers of households on low incomes, but there are also pockets across the borough. People with disabilities who are at high risk of fuel poverty.
- Many of the individuals impacted by the cost of living crisis, live in the same communities as those impacted by the Covid 19 pandemic.

Next steps

- Improving understanding of what is happening locally.
- Identifying groups where some of the impacts overlap.

Following the presentation, questions and discussion took place around the following:

- Ways to break the cycle of the cost of living crisis on people with poor mental health.
- Data on young carers living with a parent who can’t work because of a mental health condition and therefore on a low income.
- Data on cost of living and impact on crime.

The committee then heard from Councillor Stephanie Cryan, Cabinet Member for Communities, Equalities and Finance, and Dominic Cain, Director of Exchequer.

Councillor Cryan provided an update on the council’s response to the cost of living crisis. Councillor Cryan highlighted the following:

- The Cost of Living summit which took place on the 8 November. The summit was held to enable discussion of the issues that the different communities were facing in relation to the cost of living crisis. Over 100 people were in attendance. Information gathered from the event would be disseminated into a 'you said, we did' type feedback exercise.
- The launch of the Southwark Energy Savers Scheme on 8 December 2022, which involved a £92,000 commitment over 2 years. This would provide residents with support on how to save on energy bills, and also all other support that is available, and income maximisation.
- Connected Christmas Campaign, which helps support older people in the community. The initiative was run by United St Saviour's Charity but funded by the council.
- Community Referral pathway – there were now 51 referrers, only 16 previously. There had already been 1600 hundred referrals since the scheme launched in November. Support for 1312 residents had been approved in line with the approval criteria.
- Continuation of the Council Tax reduction scheme.
- Holiday meals support during the October school half term. £220,000 support provided by the council. During the Christmas holidays it was expected that £500,000 of additional support would be provided.
- Targeted campaign in relation to uptake of pension credit.

Questions and discussion were held around the following:

- Proportion of residents that were able to digitally access the services.
- Laser contract for gas supply – on-boarding of non-council residents as sub customers.
- Letters to leaseholders on district heating systems, around gas bills, in connection with what they will be required to pay.
- Advice councillors can give to tenants and residents associations in relation to referring people for support.
- Lobbying central government on impact of cost of living crisis on Southwark residents.

6. DIGITAL STRATEGY & CUSTOMER ACCESS

The committee received a presentation from Dionne Lowndes, Chief Digital & Technology Officer and Shade Nathaniel-Ayodele, Technology Project Manager. The committee also heard from Councillor Stephanie Cryan, Cabinet Member for Communities, Equalities and Finance.

Dionne and Shade informed the committee of the council's digital strategy, and highlighted action that had taken place around the following:

- Connectivity.
- Providing skills to residents.
- Supporting residents with devices
- Broadband connection for council homes/estate properties and community halls.
- Full fibre network fund, which has been used across the borough.
- Partnering with UK Broadband to provide wireless broadband services to upgrade aerials and to improve services for residents.
- £2m agreement over 10 years to provide a wireless broadband offer in Southwark and income generation for the council.
- Digital inclusion initiatives
- Improving the accessibility of the council website for people that have disabilities to ensure they are not excluded from using the website.
- Work being undertaken with communities around digital access.

At the end of the presentation and brief comments from Councillor Stephanie Cryan, questions and discussion were held around the following:

- Not spots in Dulwich Village area.
- Working with telecommunications companies in relation to disposal of telecommunications infrastructure.
- Data on percentage of residents in Southwark who are digitally excluded.
- Launch of new website.
- Work around helping people stay safe online in relation to scams and digital security, particularly older residents.
- Website redesign.
- Removal of historic documents from council website.
- District heating – use of remote sensors on pipework and in pump rooms.
- Cybersecurity.
- Measuring air quality around schools using technology.

7. SUPPORT BEING PROVIDED TO SOUTHWARK LGBTQ+COMMUNITIES

Councillor Stephanie Cryan, Cabinet Member for Communities, Equalities and Finance informed the committee that this item would focus on the LGBTQ+ community centres. Updates around the Southwark Equality Framework, and support being provided to Southwark LGBTQ+ communities would be presented to a future meeting.

The committee received a briefing from Catherine Brownell, Programme Manager on progress relating to Bankside Yards LGBTQ+ Community Centre and the Hopton Street LGBTQ+ Community Centre.

After the briefing, questions and discussion were held around the following areas:

- Future of the Hopton Street site.
- Stonewall top 100 inclusive employers list.
- Provision for a centre in the south of the borough.
- Procuring a suitable operator.
- Location of the offsite affordable housing.
- Poland – communities attempt to establish LGBTQ+ free zones. Use of twinning arrangements to exert pressure and influence.

8. WORK PROGRAMME

RESOLVED:

That the work programme as at 5 December 2022 be noted.

The meeting ended at 9.40pm

CHAIR:

DATED: