

Housing, Community Safety and Community Engagement Scrutiny Commission

MINUTES of the OPEN section of the Housing, Community Safety and Community Engagement Scrutiny Commission held on Thursday 14 December 2023 at 7.00 pm at Ground Floor Meeting Room G02A - 160 Tooley Street, London SE1 2QH

PRESENT: Councillor Sam Foster (Chair)
Councillor Emily Tester (Vice- Chair)
Councillor Ellie Cumbo
Councillor Jane Salmon
Councillor Barrie Hargrove
Councillor Victoria Mills
Cris Claridge (Co-opted Member)

**OTHER
MEMBERS**

PRESENT: Councillor Helen Dennis

**OFFICER
SUPPORT:**

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Esme Hicks and Ina Negoita (Co-opted member)

Apologies for lateness were received from Councillor Ellie Cumbo and Councillor Victoria Mills.

Councillor Ketzia Harper was present as a substitute for Cllr Esme Hicks.

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

There were no items of business which the Chair deemed urgent.

3. DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS AND DISPENSATIONS.

There were no disclosure of interests and dispensations.

4. MINUTES

Minutes of the meeting held on 12 October 2023 were approved as a correct record.

5. DRAFT HOMELESSNESS STRATEGY FOR SOUTHWARK

The commission had invited partner organisations listed below

- Melu Mekonnen Senior Housing Liaison Officer/Housing Lead Guys
And St. Thomas' Hospital Homeless Health Team
- Eamonn Egerton Outreach team St. Mungo's Southwark SPOT & SPOT Navigator Manager
- Sally Causer: Director Southwark Law Centre: Chair Southwark Homeless Forum

Sally then addressed the commission on the following points of discussion

- Consultation of the draft homelessness strategy; financial pressures on the council
- Homelessness forum having difficulties in accessing the homeless service at Bournemouth Road; 30% of callers getting through to the service that are the most vulnerable rough sleepers.
- Need for Equality Impact Assessments (EIA) to be carried out before the decisions on the post-pandemic operation of the service
- Need for partner agencies to have separate escalation process and telephone numbers to book appointments for the most vulnerable people

- Security procedures of the strategy on page 61, asks vulnerable people to speak through the foyer, between two closed doors guarded by a security guard; not the best approach on dealing with cases such as domestic abuse.
- Importance of the Southwark Law Centre in tackling the roots causes of homelessness, providing referrals to and from partner organisations such as Guys' and St. Thomas' Hospitals NHS and St. Mungo's, Southwark SPOT and also providing specialist immigration advice.

Melu then addressed the commission around the following themes

- Guy's and St. Thomas Hospitals had 458 referrals from September 2023 till November 2023, shared between Southwark Council and Lambeth with regards to homelessness, majority referred to Southwark Council;
- Joint protocol with housing options team at Southwark Council not working successfully; lack of any contact, lack of timely response, lack of overall engagement and lack of a dedicated Hospital Discharge Housing Officer (previously Lorene Hartley) since the pandemic.
- Current situations with referrals involves emailing a large/random group of officers' emails resulting in a loss of time and resources for the council.

Eamonn then addressed the commission on the following topics of discussion

- Average of 42 people, on a single night figure; most vulnerable and complex needs support are most important; winter strategy from council is strong which if applied throughout the year would help reduce homelessness on a greater scale.
- Urgency needed and issues with lack of IT Infrastructure, same day assessments take 4 weeks, documentation and paperwork processes 20 years old (from personal experience)
- Need for strengths based assessments to gauge opportunities for housing within councils processes; Accountability issues between departments of Southwark council, Housing people during winter period and eviction of rough sleepers from 4-5 January creating a bigger homelessness problem

The commission then asked questions around the following points

- Ex-offenders returning to Southwark;
- Lack of detail in the draft homelessness strategy
- Support needs for homeless people and associated factors such as drug and alcohol dependency between (2%-3%)

Eamonn informed the commission, there are systems in place for ex-offenders to get help with accommodation, however, pressures on the housing market affects them equally as well. All such matters rely on good officers willing to help the vulnerable.

Melu informed the commission that ex-offenders often end up in hospitals as a result of lack of accessibility to homelessness services through the local council.

Eamonn explained to the commission that rough sleepers have challenging needs, some are immigration issues as well and it's about tailoring to their needs.

The Chair explained to the commission that the report in this agenda on draft homelessness strategy contains only the principles of the homelessness strategy and is based on reviewing the current strategy.

Eamonn explained to the commission that, 40% have mental health issues and 35% plus have substance abuse issues within Southwark's long existing homeless population, who have faced hardships in their life. It is more important to ensure that they are supported, as rough sleeping could lead to more mental health issues and drug and alcohol dependency, rather than labelling the cause for homelessness as mental health and drug & alcohol dependency issues. With the influx of refugees being released from Home Office sponsored hotels, this number could change as within that cohort there is very little or no substance abuse or mental health issues.

Melu explained further that mental health issues, physical health issues; alcohol and drug related issues and homelessness are inter related. Homelessness can cause mental health issues and alcohol and drug dependencies; and vice-versa. Homeless people are more likely to revisit Accident and Emergency (A&E), hence increasing costs to NHS and also putting people at risk of transmission and infection of other diseases; NHS follows a process of informing Social Services, Housing Solutions, Drug and Alcohol partner agencies and Mental Health agencies, this ensures that there is integrated holistic support for such individuals.

The commission then asked questions around the following themes

- Importance of a single point of contact within the council
- Draft Homelessness Strategy; Issues and concerns to feed into consultation, publish action plan, main priorities with granular detail.
- Figures for homeless people revisiting A&E

Sally informed the commission that they would like to see a review of access to services, feedback obtained from partner organisations like Citizen Advice, DWP etc. to be fed into the consultation; accountability and a single point of council contact for rough sleeping, hospital or advice agencies.

The commission learnt from Melu that there is an urgent need for a single point of contact within the council, the joint protocol between organisations dealing homelessness needs to be efficiently implemented and it's crucial to have a single channel of communication for referrals. On revisits, the commission learnt that frequent attendance meetings in NHS take place between reps from Southwark Lambeth and Westminster where frequent attendance cases are flagged and an integrated approach is followed to support the individual.

The commission then heard from Councillor Helen Dennis and Jerome Duffy, Program Manager Housing Solutions, on the following points

- Background paper on draft homelessness strategy; reviewing 2018 strategy, Homelessness Data, challenges with Home Office discharges, focusing of resources, 12 week consultation on draft strategy
- Access to Equality Impact Assessments (EIA) department wide review; Streamlining of and investment in IT processes; accommodation capacity-beds procured.
- New cohorts of homeless people for Home Officer discharge creating challenges, regular meetings with partners, data review being enriched with data from public health, informal consultation process on going with partners- Health and Social Care.
- Bolstering support for private renters due to decrease in property standards

Then commission then asked questions on the following topics

- Addressing the issue as a result of discussions in this meeting; of a lack of a single point of contact, current processes involve emailing multiple officer by partner agencies
- Drop-in process at Bournemouth road, current process considered invasive and impersonal
- Reasons for the draft homelessness strategy not being ready and submitted to commission to review and scrutinise
- Homelessness form not updated for 20 years, 4 weeks' time taken to process a same day assessment for homelessness

Jerome explained to the commission that feedback from this meeting on the lack of a single point of contact and feedback from partners on the drop-in process would be considered when the new draft homelessness strategy is formulated.

Councillor Dennis informed the commission that the idea was to have a pre-scrutiny on the issues within the homelessness strategy and feedback from commission to feed into the draft strategy going to consultation in February 2024. Draft strategy has been delayed due to capacity and resource issues.

The commission heard from Jerome that the forms have been revised since feedback from partners. On time taken for same day assessments and referrals, officers were not aware of this issue, however this would be included in the feedback and considered when the draft strategy is proposed.

Then commission then asked questions on the following themes

- Time delays and processes for the draft strategy affecting the lives of vulnerable homeless people everyday
- Issues of Domestic Abuse and Sexual Exploitation not factored into the review of the homelessness strategy, considering it's a large cohort.
- Inclusion of EIA's especially with regards to LGBTQ+ communities
- Need for priorities in the strategy to be in granular detail and focused amidst funding, resources and capacity issues.

Councillor Dennis explained to the commission that there is a lot of activity in the Homeless sector of the council, Housing Solutions team are under a huge amount of pressure, and they are working very hard with senior officers, councillors and partners to address these issues. There is also ongoing work with Home Office discharges, evictions (friends & family) and mediation processes. Independent living projects are also ongoing in areas such as Peckham. Domestic abuse data does exist and will be discussed with officers to factor into future proposals for homelessness. LGBTQ+ data for homelessness will be looked at as well.

The Chair expressed to the commission that there is a need for the feedback from this meeting such as single point of contact and waiting times to be addressed in the intervening time between now and when the new strategy is implemented.

6. INTERVIEW WITH BOROUGH POLICE COMMANDER FOR SOUTHWARK

The commission then received a presentation (attached to minutes) from the Borough Command Unit (BCU) Commander Sebastian Adjei-Addoh and Acting Chief Inspector Aaron Barnes on the following points

- London MET undergoing reform; Baroness Casey report highlighted key issues; Policing in community and feedback from residents
- Increase in inspectors in neighbourhood policing, officers, sergeants and Inspectors; Modelling of PCSO's in wards; stronger policing uplift wards
- Structure of policing and Neighbourhood teams; Safer schools and Partnership function have Borough Command Units

- Key challenges- robberies and theft snatches, Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) and drug dealing; Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG); Homicides and rape investigations pulling resources assigned to ASB.
- Systemic issues within the National Policing Service (NPS) such as racism, misogyny and homophobia
- Stop and search pilots through intelligence, respect and information; Trust and confidence improvement plan in the community

The commission then asked questions on the following topics

- Leadership on the usage of Tasers; lack of accountability due to restructuring and redundancy of Borough Commanders positions'; down from 32 to 12 BCU Commanders.
- Rise in violent mugging on school children and young people, Trauma Support Unit to involve feedback from experiences of young people
- Triage of mental health issues with regards to contacting emergency services
- Baroness Casey review findings suggest if improvements are not achieved, it could possibly mean an inevitable breakdown of MET police into national and London Police units.

BCU Commander Sebastian informed the commission that the MET now has process for mental health issues encountered in policing and self-harm cases. It has been agreed by the Police Commissioner that mental health cases are to be referred to partner agencies and not deal by the MET police, as it's a huge drain on resources. MET is working with partner organisations to provide the right support and help. However, when there is a danger to life, police do intervene. Stop and Search process are also being reviewed. There are horrific case of people being stabbed for no reason and violent robberies. One hundred officers are based in Walworth focusing on violent crimes. MET police highly committed to tackling youth violence and crime.

The commission learnt from BCU Commander Sebastian that the individual mental health cases can vary, requiring support from NHS and/or partner organisations and/or the police. On suicidal cases, it can vary from individuals having thoughts about suicide to individuals jumping off a bridge, the latter would need police intervention as it's an immediate threat to life. On the possible breakdown of MET police into smaller London Units, there is a need for urgency for the new MET Police for London, if not, the Police Commissioner for London believes there could be radical changes.

The commission the asked further questions on the following themes

- Possibility of a Police Oversight Board for accountability; posters in the local areas showing local police contacts.
- Operation Nightingale

BCU Commander Sebastian informed the commission that the MET is accountable to Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC) which conducts its own scrutiny, but we are open and willing to join local bodies to get feedback on policing. Contact posters in local areas is an excellent idea to increase visibility of local policing.

Chief Inspector Barnes informed the commission that Operation Nightingale was a university based project, where-in random adjoining areas were selected across options from the entire borough to be monitored for police infrastructure requirements.

The commission then discussed possible recommendations on the following points

- Cabinet to establish a Police Oversight Body; intermediate body between MOPAC and Ward Panels
- Specificity of priorities for principles in homelessness strategy with regards to the needs of the borough, especially these priorities to be enlisted in the strategy action plan and tabled for consideration with draft strategy to Cabinet.
- Urgency of access to services process; working with partners
- Single point of council contact for co-ordination of homelessness referrals, reintroduction of single point of contact council contact role
- Review mechanism of draft strategy on homelessness; visibility and inclusion of the affected protected groups (Women, LGBTQ+) within the homelessness strategy.

7. PROPOSED WORK PROGRAMME 2023-2024

The commission discussed the following points

- Additional meeting to accommodate Community Engagement aspects added to this commission's remit
- Heating and Hot Water outages especially issues at Rouel Road, improvements to district heating programmes; Canada Estate and

Devonshire Mansions

- Housing Associations, issues with repairs, building repairs.
- Inviting service providers like OCO to next commission meeting
- Repairs Improvement Plan

Meeting ended at 9:37 pm

CHAIR:

DATED: