

# MINUTES OF THE SAFER STRONGER COMMUNITIES SELECT COMMITTEE

Monday, 30 November 2015 at 7.00 pm

PRESENT: Councillors Pauline Morrison (Chair), Andre Bourne, Brenda Dacres, Colin Elliott, David Michael, Luke Sorba, Paul Upex and James-J Walsh

APOLOGIES: Councillors Pat Raven and Alicia Kennedy

ALSO PRESENT: Councillor Chris Best (Cabinet Member for Health, Wellbeing and Older People), Aileen Buckton (Executive Director for Community Services), Matthew Henaughan (Community Resources Manager), Mick Lear (Service Manager, Benefits), James Lee (Service Manager, Inclusion and Prevention and Head of Cultural and Community Development), Genevieve Macklin (Head of Strategic Housing), Councillor Jim Mallory, Councillor Joan Millbank (Cabinet Member Third Sector & Community), Barrie Neal (Head of Corporate Policy and Governance), Tony Nickson (Voluntary Action Lewisham), Antonio Rizzo (Library and Information Services Manager), Ralph Wilkinson (Head of Public Services), Simone van Elk (Scrutiny Manager) and Petra Der Man (Principal Lawyer)

## 1. Minutes of the meeting held on 21 October 2015

- 1.1 **RESOLVED:** that the minutes of the meeting held on 21 October 2015 be agreed as an accurate record.

## 2. Declarations of interest

- 2.1 The following non-prejudicial interests were declared:

Councillor Colin Elliot: Council's representative for the Lewisham Disability Coalition.  
Cllr James-J Walsh: re-established the Lewisham LGBT forum  
Councillor Pauline Morrison: volunteer at Crofton Park Library  
Councillor Paul Upex: ward Councillor for Forest Hill, and Member of the Greenwich Cooperative Development Agency

## 3. Poverty review - evidence session

- 3.1 Ralph Wilkinson (Head of Public Services), Mick Lear (Head of Benefits) and Genevieve Macklin (Head of Strategic Housing) introduced the report to the Committee. The following key points were noted:
- Changes to legislation were announced after the papers for this meeting were published.
  - The number of cases of tenants across Lewisham affected by the bedroom tax went down in the previous financial year. This happened for a variety of reasons: some residents have come off benefits, some have moved to smaller accommodation and some have become exempt. The Council uses discretionary housing benefit payments to assist residents impacted by the bedroom tax while they look for smaller

accommodation. A requirement of the discretionary payment is that residents look for smaller accommodation and at least bid for smaller properties but often recipients will have made no efforts to move.

- Approximately 26,000 families or single parents and 18,500 single people are in receipt of benefits across Lewisham. It is estimated that about 400 cases will be affected by the new benefit cap. Of those, 56% will have 3 or more children and 19% will 5 or more children. The Council uses discretionary housing payments to support these residents.
- Last year, the funding from central government for the discretionary housing payments was £1.7m, but the Council spent £1.9m. Some of the shortfall was covered by payment from the housing revenue account. The payment is conditional on the residents actively looking for a smaller property to move into.
- The government has committed to spend £800m nationally to fund discretionary housing payments. If the distribution of this was the same as the current grant, this would mean a small increase in funding for Lewisham.
- The administration of Universal Credit is done by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and JobCentre+. The payment is done in similar way to a salary, where there is one payment a month. In addition, the payment will be made to one member of the household. Recipients of Universal Credit will have an online account to manage their claim. Full migration to Universal Credit is scheduled for completion in 2020. The delivery model for supporting the transition to Universal Credit for the Council will be done in collaboration with Lambeth and Southwark.
- A maximum of two children are to be included in the calculation of child tax credit calculations. This change is due to come in in 2017.
- 'Pay to Stay' is a policy announced by the government where households in social housing earning over £40,000 will be required to pay market rates or near market rates. It's estimated that between 1,800 and 2,200 households would be affected in Lewisham across the entire social housing sector.
- A 2 bedroom property in Lewisham costs £1,300 on average. According to research by Shelter, households need an income of about £56,000 to cover these costs. A couple earning £40,000 a year would be able to afford a rent of about £950. This cap applies to households and not individual earnings. This means the threshold would be reached by a couple both earning slightly more than the London living wage. The legislation currently states that councils should charge rents up to market rates so the government may introduce a scale.
- Rent rates have a considerable impact on the disposable income available to renters. Most partners building developments in Lewisham do not set rent rates above 65% of market rates. Affordability is an issue across all tenures: home ownership, private renting and social renting.
- Housing supply was last in line with demand for housing in the late 1960s. Since then, the shortage of housing has been getting worse. House prices in Lewisham have increased significantly and as a result more people have become homeless. New supply of homes has gone down while demand has increased. This has also decreased the numbers of social housing units becoming available as people move out. This in turn has resulted in the number of people in temporary accommodation increasing. The number of available social housing units is miniscule compared to the numbers needed.

- More people are being evicted from the Private Rented Sector as landlords have a choice of tenants due to the shortage of properties. There are more children living in poverty in the private rented sector than before.
- Right to Buy is being extended to include properties owned by housing associations. This will mean less stock is available for social rents. The 'Pay to Stay' policy would make it more likely than people will exercise their Right to Buy. Housing Associations will be required to decrease social housing rents by 1% per year for the next four years starting April 2016. This will have an impact on their ability to make the development of new homes financially viable.

3.2 Ralph Wilkinson, Mick Lear and Genevieve Macklin responded to questions from the Committee. The following key points were noted:

- The model being developed with Lambeth and Southwark is to support people in the transition to Universal Credit. This will include support in developing budgeting skills as well as employment support. Negotiations are on-going with DWP about the model. Estimates from DWP are that about 5% of people will need support in the transition, while the Council estimates that this will be more like 40% of people.
- The payment of Universal Credit to one member of the household could be very problematic in cases of domestic violence.
- Universal Credit won't have a weighting for London applied. The benefit cap however is higher in London than elsewhere in the country due to the increased cost of living in the capital. London Boroughs have argued that, although the benefit cap would be 14% higher in London than the rest of the country, the cost of living in London is even greater than that. This hasn't increased the benefit cap in London however.
- 54% of the households impacted by the benefit cap live in the private rented sector. The benefit cap may lead to people being unable to pay rent and therefore may increase the number of evictions and homeless households.
- The difference between the percentage of population receiving working tax credit nationally and in Lewisham may be explained by a difference in the level of wages and more people working part time.
- It has not been confirmed yet how the households that would be required to 'Pay to Stay' would be identified. Indications are that the government will likely estimate for each local authority how many tenants are earning over this threshold and Councils would then be required to pay government the difference between the social rents and the market rents. It seems likely that Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs would share information with local authorities about the earnings of residents. Tenants would also be required to notify the Council if their earnings rise above £40,000. The onus would be on local authorities and tenants to ensure the required rents are paid. As the legislation develops, a key question is how the Council would cover the costs of implementing these changes.
- It would be better if the threshold for 'Pay to Stay' was set with reference to the Local Housing Allowance, as this is an established mechanism linked to local market rents. The amount of rent charged under this policy should be no higher than the Local Housing Allowance for that property type.
- The model of paying discretionary housing benefit is being looked at to ensure people are still supported when needed but are also still incentivised to move to smaller accommodation. If this grant isn't spent, the money has to go back to central

government. There is a difficult balance to strike between applying conditionality, incentivising people to move and supporting them temporarily. It is not clear yet how much funding the Council will receive next year to cover the cost of discretionary housing payments.

- Officers are working with Lewisham Homes and PFI providers to ensure all tenants receive communications about the changes to welfare and housing. This communication likely won't go out until more details about the regulations are known.
- Landlords are kept aware of changes in housing benefits payments as much as possible, but the Council doesn't have full list of private landlords operating in the borough. There is a lot of work on-going to ensure tenants are informed and supported in adjusting to these changes.

3.3 Standing orders were suspended at 21.25

3.4 **RESOLVED:** that the Committee note the report.

#### **4. Library Consultation 2015 Update**

4.1 This item was discussed before item 3 (Poverty review evidence session).

4.2 Aileen Buckton (Executive Director for Community Services) introduced the report. The following key points were noted:

- This report presents the outcome of the public consultation on the proposed changes to the library service initially presented to the Committee in September as part of the Lewisham Future Programme.
- The one proposal that has been put forward for consultation is to have three libraries functions as hubs: Downham, Deptford and Lewisham. The community library model would be extended to Torridon Road, Manor House and Forest Hill libraries. Organisations would be invited to manage the buildings, run services from the library building and organise events. These activities would be complementary to the library service itself. The library service in those community libraries would still be provided by the Council staff and supported by a peripatetic community engagement team. The necessary training would be provided for both staff and the relevant community organisations to enable the community libraries to thrive.
- The budget savings proposal for the library service was £1m – of this, £900k could be saved from the libraries budget, while the remaining £50k would be saved from renegotiating some contracts within the Deptford Lounge budget. This renegotiating would not entail a reorganisation of staff, but rather changes to the facilities management contract which covers cleaning and general maintenance.
- A large majority of the responses to the consultation expressed concern and a number of residents suggested that no savings should be made from the library budget at all, and suggested that the Council not set a legal and therefore balanced budget for the next financial year.
- For the purpose of this report, officers were tasked with identifying £1m of savings in the budget for libraries, and were not asked to consider spending in other areas of the Council. The proposal going forward for a decision is to convert three libraries to community libraries. It was not in the remit of this report to consider not making this saving.
- There were concerns expressed about the capacity of volunteers to run library services. The proposals, however, do not suggest that volunteers will provide the library service – this will still be done by Council staff but on a peripatetic basis. The

library service would change as community groups and their volunteers would manage the buildings and organise some of the activities in them.

- There was a general concern that students may no longer be able to use the libraries to study, but it was confirmed that the opportunity for students and pupils to study in the buildings would not change under the proposals.
- A specific alternative proposal submitted during the consultation was to use volunteers across all of the current libraries and spread the remaining library staff thinly across all libraries. If this were enacted the libraries would have reduced opening hours.
- Concerns were raised that Catford library would feel desolate after the reorganisation of the ground floor of Laurence House. Current plans are for the Council's Access point, reception and library to be reconfigured completely and the library would be dispersed across the ground floor of Laurence House. Detailed plans for what this would look like would come forward at the same time as the specifications for the three proposed community libraries would be developed.
- If the proposals to convert Forest Hill, Manor House and Torridon Road Library to community libraries go ahead, the public would be invited to participate in the procurement process. During the procurement process, specifications would be developed for each of the libraries. Community groups could then bid for the opportunity to run one of library buildings according to those specifications. Residents would be involved in this second stage of the process.

4.3 A member of the library staff made a representation to the Committee. The following key points were noted:

- All library staff are trained to provide services in the libraries but only 6 are qualified as librarians. There is not a huge division between those different members of staff.
- If the proposals go ahead, it seems Lewisham would have gone from twelve Council run libraries to just three in the space of five years. The west of Lewisham wouldn't have a Council run library at all.
- Libraries help people develop their reading skills, help people discover their love for books and help people get online. The support for people to use online services can range from getting crisis loans to finding education to applying for jobs and help people apply for a Freedom Pass.
- The report presented doesn't seem to accurately reflect the consultation responses.
- The savings that the Council is considering are imposed by central government and Councillors should fight these cuts alongside the residents.

4.4 A member of the public made a representation to the Committee. The following key points were noted:

- Councillors are asked to defend the libraries from these cuts and find an alternative.
- It was felt that the existing community libraries have meant a loss of the library service and have damaged local communities.
- People would be forced to travel to access a Council run library, which would be difficult for the elderly, the disabled and women wanting to take their children to the library.
- Libraries make valuable contributions to reading skills, and can help improve outcomes in schools.
- In 2009, Mayor and Cabinet agreed an implementation plan for the library service where it was specified that there should be a clear cost and benefit analysis including costs and statistics of usage. This hasn't been adhered to in this case.

4.5 Aileen Buckton clarified that this decision by Mayor and Cabinet in 2009 to include clear cost and benefit analysis related to any proposals to close libraries. This was not relevant in this case as there were no proposals to close a library.

- 4.6 A representative of Defend Torridon Road Library made a representation to the Committee. The following key points were noted:
- The resident had lived in the borough for 28 years, and had worked in education in the borough for 32 years. She had been a governor of two secondary schools in Lewisham over the course of 8 years and had spent a significant amount of her time supporting children including with their reading skills.
  - A petition was presented which was signed by many concerned residents who couldn't attend due to commitments for work and their families. These people use their local libraries and want them preserved.
- 4.7 The petition was handed to Antonio Rizzo (Head of Library and Information Service), and Aileen Buckton assured the Committee and members of the public that the petition would be included in the reports presented to the Mayor and Cabinet meeting on 9 December for a decision.
- 4.8 A member of the public made a representation to the Committee. The following key point was noted:
- The model of the community library did not seem to be working well. Usage of the community libraries seemed to have gone down by between 60% and 90%.
- 4.9 A member of the public made a representation to the Committee regarding Catford library. The following key points were noted:
- It had been appalling to hear the plans for Catford library described. There was a concern that untrained reception staff would be responsible for providing advice on the library services while also being responsible for a multitude of other tasks.
  - The community libraries didn't look inspiring.
  - Catford seemed an obvious choice for people to go to for their library services and to find information given it is placed in the same building as the Council offices.
- 4.10 Aileen Buckton and Antonio Rizzo responded to questions from the Committee. The following key points were noted:
- The issuing of books in libraries in Lewisham (i.e. the lending) has gone down, and more so in community libraries than in the Council run libraries. This is not just happening in Lewisham but across the country. There is a national increase in the use of e-books. The decrease in lending of books in Lewisham is less than the national trend.
  - Overall visits to libraries in Lewisham have increased and in the recent resident survey, satisfaction with the libraries has gone up to 76% of respondents. In addition, activities in libraries have increased including reading clubs for children and families. In some libraries the opening hours have also increased.
  - The peripatetic service would mean that the library staff would work on the services at the community libraries 1 to 1,5 days a week on average. There wouldn't be fixed time that the staff would be in each library as the demands for the service wouldn't be the same each week. Library staff would also work outside the libraries in outreach activity, for instance in schools.
  - A main element of the savings would be a loss of library staff. As with any other reorganisation in the Council, staff would be supported with redeployment and with seeking jobs elsewhere.

- The west of Lewisham would still have access to libraries as there would be community libraries present. People could visit their local community library, and would not need to travel to a hub library to access library services.
- The development of technology in the community libraries would keep pace with those developments in the hub libraries as technological advancements continue. The library service already has a large digital offer with access to periodicals from all over the world.
- The library service is a statutory free service, except for the fines charged when materials are handed in late and the charges levied for ordering books. Community groups can fundraise to offer services offer and above the library offer. Residents could not be asked to pay to use the Council's stock of library books. The charge for ordering a book is £0.50, which is one of the lowest charges in London. If this amount were not charged, the budget for the library service would need to be reduced somehow to cover the loss of income.
- Community groups would be helped in training their volunteers. Should a community group bid to manage a community library they would need to present a business case. This would need to include their plans for managing volunteers and demonstrate their experience in working with volunteers.
- The consultation was run for a sufficient length of time. A number of meetings were organised where information was provided about the plans. People wanted to know more detail about the plans: such as which community group might run their library and what services would be on offer. But this information would only be available as part of the procurement process. The consultation was advertised in local press as well as online, and there were many responses from individual residents.
- The Council uses CIPFA's performance measures to measure how its libraries are used. These are nationally used standards, and they look at more than just the figures for the borrowing of books. These performance measures are used for both the Council run and community libraries. The usage of libraries has gone up in Lewisham across all the metrics.

4.11 A Councillor who is not a Member of the Committee addressed the Committee. The following key points were noted:

- Lee Green Assembly had established a working group to contribute to plans for Manor House Library. Assemblies needed to be involved in the process of converting to community libraries.
- Each library has its unique circumstances and so required a different solution. Local communities needed to be kept involved as plans developed.
- Community groups would need an income to be able to maintain the library building they would manage and some of their activities in the library could create such an income. However there needs to be a careful balance between income generating activities and free activities to ensure free and low-cost activities are still available for local community.

4.12 Aileen Buckton addressed the Committee. The following key points were noted:

- Officers would involve the local community, stake holders and local assemblies in developing detailed plans for the libraries. However, given the limited staff resources, there wouldn't be an opportunity for staff to support an individual working group from each relevant assembly. Some engagement activities would probably need to be organised collectively for the three libraries.

4.13 Councillor Chris Best, Cabinet Member with responsibility for libraries, addressed the Committee. The following key points were noted:

- People were thanked for attending the meeting, and thanked for sharing their passion. Everyone was invited to attend the Mayor and Cabinet meeting on 9 December as well.
- The anti-austerity view that had been expressed reflected the difficult financial challenge the Council was facing. Councillors are responsible for running the Council and for facing that challenge. In doing this, they would seek to work local communities to find the best possible solution.
- Residents had been asked for their views so the Council could look for local solutions. There are solutions to be found when working with partners.
- The Council is striving to keep all library services available in the best way possible. The new community libraries would not be the same and they may not be perfect, but the libraries would contain a stock of books, have wifi available for their users and provide a digital offer.

4.14 The Committee made a number of comments. The following key points were noted:

- Members of the Committee expressed having fond memories of visiting their local libraries as a child, and noted with reluctance the need to make these savings.
- Members noted the large number of savings that needed to be made across the Council due to cuts in central government's Local Government Grant Funding: during the last government Lewisham's grant had been reduced by £120 million from £391 to £271 million. As announced during the Comprehensive Spending Review, the local government grant during this government would fall by 56% in general. If Lewisham's grant is reduced by 56%, this would mean only £171 million is left by 2020.
- Members noted with regret that it would not be possible to completely exempt the library service from these savings. The result of setting an unbalanced budget for the next financial year would be that central government would determine the Council's budget, and that this would likely lead to worse outcomes and less engagement with the public.
- Local communities, stakeholders and the relevant local assemblies would need to be kept involved with development of plans for each of the libraries.

4.15 The Committee resolved to advise Mayor and Cabinet of the following:

*The Committee welcomed the contributions from residents, and acknowledges the dedication to and passion for local libraries displayed by the members of the public present at the meeting.*

*The Committee noted the petition presented by a representative of Defend Torrison Road Library, and noted officers' assurance this would be presented to Mayor and Cabinet as part of their consideration of the outcome of the Library Consultation 2015.*

*The Committee is aware of the Council's difficult financial situation due to central government cuts to the local government central grant, and is aware of the Council's need to make savings in many areas including the library service. The Committee recommends with reluctance that the proposals for changes to the library service are presented to Mayor and Cabinet unchanged.*

*The Committee feels that, while these proposals should go ahead, further work needs to be done on the integration of the library provision in Catford into the repurposed ground floor space within Laurence House.*

*The Committee also strongly recommends that officers engage with the public including via the relevant Local Assemblies to ensure the public's contributions and its commitment to libraries are included in the development of more detailed plans for the libraries.*

4.16 **RESOLVED** that the Committee views be referred to Mayor and Cabinet.



## **5. Main Grants Programme 2015-18 - Equalities Update**

5.1 James Lee (Head of Culture and Community Development) introduced the report. The following key points were noted:

- The report details the work undertaken under the Equalities strand of the Main Grants Programme 2015-18.
- The monitoring of grant funded work is done in two ways: officers will check up on organisations' progress, but organisations themselves will also alert officers if there any problems in the delivery of their work.
- Voluntary Action Lewisham (VAL) is the lead agency that coordinates the work on equalities. VAL also works with the Equalities Working Group that has a specific equalities remit under the Main Grants Programme 2015-18, as well as other areas of the Council, such as the Violence Against Women and Girls service.

5.2 James Lee, Tony Nickson (Director of Voluntary Action Lewisham), Matthew Henaughan (Cultural Development Manager) and Aileen Buckton responded to questions from the Committee. The following key points were noted:

- The Equalities Working Group would work to identify any need for work on equalities. The Group would also coordinate equalities work done across the voluntary sector. The group could also raise any need they've identified with relevant organisations so action can be taken. This could include contact with Council services, Councillors and other providers in Lewisham.
- The application process for Grants was rigorous and organisations had to meet a high bar to receive a Grant. The action plan for the Equalities Working Group may be ambitious but there is nothing to suggest the action plan is not deliverable at this stage.
- VAL is responsible for coordinating work across the voluntary and community sector to contribute towards the objectives set out in the Council's Comprehensive Equalities Scheme (CES). The CES forms a framework for the equalities work done by the voluntary sector.
- VAL has a capacity building programme which support voluntary sector organisations in becoming sustainable and growing their organisations. Organisations in receipt of grant funding are also monitored by officers using the Rocket Science method.
- The delivery plan for EqualiTeam Lewisham has been agreed with the organisation. Some of the activities listed have already started, for instance the work with the Stephen Lawrence Centre and the work with the Metro Centre following discussions in the Equalities Working Group. The objectives for EqualiTeam's work are shared across a number of organisations. Some organisations are expected to deliver on their objectives by the end of the three year Grant Programme while EqualiTeam is expected to deliver against the objectives in 6 months. Each organisation has its own action plan – only the action plan for EqualiTeam Lewisham has been included with the report.

5.3 The Committee made the following comments:

- Some Members of the Committee felt that the Equalities Working Group Action Plan was impressive and were interested in whether the objectives would be delivered against.
- One Member of the Committee felt that the objectives listed were not specific enough, and requested that in future the objectives of organisations in receipt of grant funding from the Council should all follow the SMART format (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic and Time-related).

5.4 **RESOLVED:** that the Committee noted the report

## 6. Select Committee work programme

6.1 Simone van Elk (Scrutiny Manager) introduced the report. The Committee discussed the work programme and decided that:

- The Committee meeting on 19 January should start at 18.30.
- That the Chair and Scrutiny Manager should review the timings of the work programme for January.

6.2 **RESOLVED:** to agree the change to the work programme, as discussed.

## 7. Items to be referred to Mayor and Cabinet

7.1 **RESOLVED:** to refer the Committee's views on the Library Consultation 2015 Update to Mayor and Cabinet.

The meeting ended at 10.35 pm

Chair:

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Date:

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