# MINUTES OF THE SAFER STRONGER COMMUNITIES SELECT COMMITTEE

## Tuesday, 7 November 2023 at 7.00 pm

IN ATTENDANCE: Councillors Liam Shrivastava (Chair), Hau-Yu Tam (Vice-Chair), Coral Howard, Mark Jackson, Oana Olaru and Rachel Onikosi

ALSO JOINING THE MEETING VIRTUALLY: Councillor Rudi Schmidt (ex officio)

APOLOGIES: Councillor Ayesha Lahai-Taylor

ALSO PRESENT: James Lee (Director of Communities, Partnerships and Leisure), Sidra Hill-Reid (Head of Community Education and Cultural Assets), Sakthi Suriyaprakasam (Head of Culture and Community Development) and Benjamin Awkal (Scrutiny Manager)

ALSO PRESENT VIRTUALLY: Councillor Juliet Campbell (Cabinet Member for Communities, Refugees and Community Safety) and Tom Brown (Executive Director for Community Services)

NB: Those Councillors listed as joining virtually were not in attendance for the purposes of the meeting being quorate, any decisions taken or to satisfy the requirements of s85 Local Government Act 1972

1. **Minutes of the meeting held on 14 September 2023**

   **RESOLVED**
   That the minutes of the meeting held on 14 September 2023 be agreed as an accurate record.

2. **Declarations of interest**

   There were none.

   NB: under item 5, Cllr Onikosi declared that she recused herself from prosecutions relating to Lewisham Neighbourhood Community Infrastructure Levy in Bromley and Bexley Magistrates Courts due to her position as a Lewisham Councillor.

3. **Libraries and Information Service**

   **Witnesses**
   James Lee, Director of Communities, Partnerships and Leisure
   Sidra Hill-Reid, Head of Community Education and Cultural Assets

   **Key points from discussion**
   The witnesses introduced the report. Key points included:
   3.1.    There were synergies across the back-office functions of the services comprising the new Community Education and Cultural Assets Service.

3.2.	Savings of 55 per cent (in cash terms) had been achieved by the Libraries Service since the adoption of the community libraries model.

3.3.	The community libraries model was internationally regarded as one of best practice and had enabled all of the Council's libraries to remain open despite funding reductions.

3.4.	Libraries engaged with all of the Council's strategic themes and were a key delivery mechanism under the Culture Strategy. There was opportunity for them to increase their role as partners and gateways to a number of council services.

3.5.	Book issues were exceeding, but footfall (partially due to the partial closure of Lewisham Library) was still significantly lower than, pre-Covid 19 levels.

3.6.	The proportion of library members – 88 per cent – declaring a disability required interrogation.

3.7.	The Community Library model ensured a locality-based offer while supporting voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations and enabling them to provide volunteering opportunities to the community.

3.8.	The Library Service was reviewing Blackheath, Crofton Park and Grove Park community libraries' arrangements and long-term sustainability.

3.9.	Blackheath Library's provider was experiencing challenges with recruiting volunteers but was committed to maintaining its service and was being supported by the Library Service.

3.10.	Eco Communities had sought to withdraw from Crofton Park and Grove Park Libraries at short notice. Owing to issues relating to sub-tenants, Eco Communities was unable to withdraw from Crofton Park Library currently and was continuing to deliver the service and Grove Park Library remained closed despite the identification of a new provider.

3.11.	The community library model was to be reviewed and an annual community libraries review process developed to ensure adequate support for, and quality assurance of, community library providers.

3.12.	Lewisham Library was at RIBA (Royal Institute of British Architects) Stage 2.

The Committee then put questions to witnesses:

3.13.	Under a wider restructure as part of the Borough of Culture Legacy, increased senior management capacity had been installed to provide strategic direction to the Service. Long-standing issues had been identified and the Service was being stabilised. The Director was confident that the management team had a strong grip of where the issues lay.

3.14.	The Council's oversight of community libraries had previously lacked due diligence, care and attention, leading to the recent issues and the ongoing reviews. Improved governance and focus was required, and would be implemented.

3.15.	The decant of Lewisham Library had been challenging and time consuming.

3.16.	There was a question of whether the current community library offer – where one provider ran three libraries – reflected the original intent of the model: hyper-local management of libraries by the communities they served.

3.17. The review of community library model would consider the equity of library provision and access across the borough. It was noted that community libraries being closed on certain days could result from the challenges of finding volunteer staffing, the resilience of voluntary workforces or providers' need to generate income.

3.18. The Service had committed to bringing forward recommendations on a potential increase in opening hours for hub libraries and a new fines and charges policy. However, the closure of Lewisham Library had offset the costs of reopening Catford Library, and the Service did not want to increase opening hours to only reduce them again once Lewisham Library reopened.

3.19. In the short term, the Service was aiming to deliver an in-year underspend to offset overspending elsewhere in the Council.

3.20. Proposals to deliver more services from the Downham Health and Leisure Centre, which contained Downham Library, were likely to be brought forward in the new year. There were issues relating the building's PFI contract, but those were not likely to be restrictive.

3.21. There was a lack of recent qualitative data on the operation and impact of libraries; such data were to be acquired through the review of community libraries and engagement relating to the proposed new library strategy.

3.22. The Library Service's offers went beyond what was available in its buildings, with services provided to schools and outreach to other residents. The Service could do more to publicise its free to access collective offer.

3.23. The notices required under the leases of community libraries provided sufficient time for an alternative provider to be secured when a provider withdrew.

3.24. Lewisham Library would generate income to sustain library services. The community was to be consulted regarding how the library was experienced by its users.

3.25. The Service, and the public, valued staffed, as opposed to self-service, libraries/opening hours.

3.26. The Service was to explore opportunities for income generation. There was less potential for income generation by hub libraries, which were used by the community and partners a lot.

3.27. Fines – which were not presently being collected– generated negligible income and served primarily to assign notional value to materials. Ensuring residents were not discouraged from accessing libraries was the priority.

3.28. The regeneration of Catford created opportunity to co-locate services and generate income in a new library.

3.29. In relation to the proposed Library Strategy, the Director committed to the Service reviewing the sustainability of the library service and community library model, current income generation and further income generation opportunities, and effectively engaging, consulting and communicating with the community.

**ACTION**
The Head of Community Education and Cultural Assets to provide detail on the other activities undertaken by the Library Service, such as outreach and services provided to schools.

**RESOLVED**
That the report be noted.

## 4. Local Assemblies Update

**Witnesses**
Cllr Juliet Campbell, Cabinet Member for Communities, Refugees and Community Safety

James Lee, Director of Communities, Partnerships and Leisure
Sakthi Suriyaprakasam, Head of Culture and Community Development

**Key points from discussion**
The witnesses introduced the report. Key points included:

4.1. Local Assemblies were introduced in 2007 as vehicle for local empowerment, establishing a structured environment in each ward that would support an ongoing process for identifying and resourcing local concerns and implement local solutions. Since 2010/11, their budgets of £25,000 per ward to implement local solutions had been progressively reduced and eventually removed; administrative support staffing had also been reduced. This had changed the nature and purposes of assemblies, which were now more modes of consultation and engagement. The role of Assemblies was therefore being reviewed, which would help determine how they should be delivered in the present context.

4.2. Councillors' appreciation of the opportunity to engage with large groups of residents, among other forms of engagement, was recognised.

4.3. The 2019 Democracy Review had found Assemblies to be unrepresentative: they engaged already democratically engaged residents and did not attract seldom-heard communities.

4.4. The Covid-19 pandemic had required the suspension of Assemblies for 10 months and subsequent resumption as online meetings. The online meetings had shown residents to be keen to reengage with the Council. Voices of Lewisham had concluded that the Council should adopt a 'collaborative leadership approach' to resident engagement.

4.5. Under the current model, a minimum of two Council-led online assemblies were provided for each ward, supplemented by further community-led assemblies, which community groups could apply for Neighbourhood Community Infrastructure Levy (NCIL) funding to deliver. Eight organisations servicing nine wards had applied for NCIL funding to deliver assemblies.

4.6. The survey of councillors had received variable feedback on the performance of Assemblies. Approximately half of the 25 respondents had been elected to the Council for the first time in 2021.

4.7. Most survey respondents thought council-led assemblies had been successful. Thirty-six per cent thought NCIL-funded assemblies had been successful, which resonated with feedback from the community groups who had arranged them. Feedback regarding non-NCIL-funded, community-led assemblies was less favourable.

4.8. Promoting Assemblies needed to improve. Historically, all homes in the borough had received leaflets promoting Assemblies, whereas now the Council's Communications Service and mailing lists were relied upon.

4.9. Respondents considered that Assemblies were successful at engaging residents in Council agendas.

4.10. A discussion with stakeholders – likely including coordinating groups – about the role and functioning of Assemblies was required. There were issues that were discussed at multiple Assemblies which may be better discussed on a greater scale.

The Committee then discussed the role and functioning of local assemblies with witnesses. Key points included:

4.11. The role and business of Assemblies could better align with corporate strategy, while maintaining their distinct local characters.

4.12. Community Development Officers were skilled at their core functions but could potentially be better supported by other areas of the Council, such as Communications.

4.13. While the role of Assemblies would need to be defined before their resourcing determined, it was unlikely that Assemblies would engage a more diverse cohort of residents if they were not better resourced; whether they would ever do so regardless of resourcing was questioned also.

4.14. It was likely that Assemblies would remain modes of local engagement for councillors.

4.15. The differing natures of wards meant some would require greater support than others to deliver successful Assemblies. It was not reasonable to expect community groups from some wards to be willing and able to apply for NCIL to deliver Assemblies.

4.16. If Assemblies were to support engagement across Council services, that role should be recognised and resourced appropriately. However, that was not commonly recognised as their role.

4.17. It was resource consuming and challenging for the same proposals to be presented in 19 different Assemblies.

4.18. Community Development Officers performed other functions in addition to supporting Assemblies and it was difficult to precisely disaggregate the time spent supporting each Assembly.

4.19. Despite their unrepresentativeness, Assemblies presented an opportunity for the Council to be directly responsive to local issues raised by residents.

4.20. Each Assembly had a different impact on its ward.

4.21. In some cases, Assemblies had successfully engaged otherwise seldom-heard people and it was important that any changes did not exclude such residents' participation.

4.22. Local engagement on a scale greater than ward level should be considered.

4.23. The previously allocated funding had helped stimulate resident engagement with Assemblies.

4.24. Officers were to reopen the survey to provide opportunity for all Councillors to respond, undertake more detailed analysis of the survey's findings and were content to share options for the future role of assemblies with the Committee in the future.

**RESOLVED**
That the report be noted.

5.     **Neighbourhood Community Infrastructure Levy update**

**Witnesses**
Cllr Juliet Campbell, Cabinet Member for Communities, Refugees and Community Safety

James Lee, Director of Communities, Partnerships and Leisure
Sakthi Suriyaprakasam, Head of Culture and Community Development

**Key points from discussion**
5.1.   The Neighbourhood Community Infrastructure Levy (NCIL) programme was likely to be relaunched following the Greater London Authority election in May 2024, which would require a preceding executive decision in February or March.
5.2.   Due to the complexities of applying for funding for, and delivering, capital projects, the Council was considering proposing, in consultation with local members, projects which would be beneficial for localities, which would then be subject to the same selection process – voting by residents – as resident-proposed projects.

Cllr Schmidt left at 9.27 pm.

5.3.   The redistribution of Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) monies from wards with high levels of development to ones with less development under NCIL was welcomed. However, for wards with little development, the redistributed funding was not enough to deliver significant projects; some other local authorities grouped two or three neighbouring wards for CIL distribution.
5.4.   Distribution of a certain amount of NCIL on the basis of three subdivisions of the borough was being considered. Distribution of borough-wide NCIL in a manner which addressed the inequities faced by smaller boroughs was also being considered.

James Lee left at 9.31 pm.
Cllr Howard left at 9.33 pm.

5.5.   A policy on grant making, including equitable access to grants, was being developed.
5.6.   NCIL had enabled the Council to give grants to organisations and individuals it had not before, and who were unlikely to successfully access the Council's main grants programme. A range of support had been provided to applicants under the last round of NCIL. Lewisham Local's community fundraisers could provide one-to-one support to applicants under the next round. The Council's capacity to provide additional support to applicants was limited; further support would divert resource from delivery.

5.7.    It was noted that accessibility was broader than direct support for applicants: forms could be made easier to understand; and some organisations accepted video or audio applications.

5.8.    Creative thinking and learning from other local authorities was encouraged.

**RESOLVED**

That the report be noted.

## 6.    Select Committee work programme

6.1.    The Committee's preference for short presentations and purposive report recommendations at future meetings was noted.

**RESOLVED**

That the report be noted.


The meeting ended at 9.45 pm


Chair:
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Date:
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