

Minutes of the Safer Stronger Communities Select Committee

Thursday, 2 March 2023 at 7.00 pm

In attendance: Councillors Ayesha Lahai-Taylor (Chair), Liam Shrivastava (Vice-Chair), Mark Jackson, Hilary Moore, Rachel Onikosi, Hau-Yu Tam and Mark Ingleby

Also present: Timothy Andrew (Scrutiny Manager) and Sophie Wickham (Director) (Action for Refugees in Lewisham)

Also present virtually: Councillor Bill Brown, James Lee (Director of Communities, Partnership and Leisure); and Sakthi Suriyaprakasam (Community Development Service Manager)

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 17 January 2023

- 1.1 It was agreed that the minutes of the meeting held on 17 January be approved as an accurate record.
- 1.2 **Resolved:** that the minutes of the meeting held on 17 January 2023 be agreed as an accurate record.

2. Declarations of interest

- 2.1 There were none.

3. Responses from Mayor and Cabinet

- 3.1 There were none.

4. Borough of Sanctuary update

- 4.1 Sophie Wickham (Director, Action for Refugees in Lewisham) was invited to address the Committee. She provided an overview of AFRILs work; welcoming the adoption of the Borough of Sanctuary Strategy and highlighting the need for senior stakeholders across Council departments to ensure that support for refugees and asylum seekers was standard practice across Council services. She also highlighted concerns about access to healthcare and the operation of asylum hotels in the borough. The cases of several families in poor accommodation (including those who had experienced multiple and complex traumas) were provided to illustrate the failure of support systems both locally and nationally.
- 4.2 Sophie Wickham responded to questions from the Committee – the following key points were noted:
 - It was agreed that longer term strategic work should take place to ensure that there was a response to the needs of families with no recourse to public funds.
 - The concern that the strategy is not embedded across the organisation at every level.

- Messaging from the senior leadership in the organisation and senior service managers regarding the Council's responsibilities (particularly in the case of families with no recourse to public funds) would be a welcome improvement.
- That additional consideration should be given to the temporary accommodation provided for vulnerable families (including those with no recourse to public funds).
- There were leads within the organisation who had started to set up processes to implement the strategy – their effectiveness was yet to be seen but it was a positive move.
- There had been an improvement since the appointment of the Borough of Sanctuary programme manager.
- AFRIL could assess the success of the 500 people it supported but there was a shortage of resources and funding for this work which meant that resources were focused on the frontline rather than reporting, evaluation and research into the sector more broadly.
- Political consideration could be given to the ways in which providers commissioned by central government should be held to account.
- The work of the Borough of Sanctuary team (particularly the new Borough of Sanctuary manager) was welcomed.

4.3 James Lee (Director of Communities, Partnership and Leisure) introduced the officer report – noting the work that was taking place with the migration forum and community and voluntary sector organisations in the borough. He highlighted that the communities, partnership and leisure division had only become recently responsible for the overall delivery of the Borough of Sanctuary strategy – but he felt it was making good progress with implementation.

4.4 James Lee and Sakthi Suriyaprakasam (Community Development Service Manager) responded to questions from the Committee – the following key points were noted:

- It was recognised that more than half of the delivery of the Borough of Sanctuary strategy was about culture – which meant that senior level support for was essential for the effective delivery of the Council's ambitions.
- James was the senior responsible officer for the programme – and would escalate concerns and issues as necessary (including those that had been highlighted at the meeting).
- The original expectation of the division regarding the delivery of the Borough of Sanctuary strategy was that it would entail high level policy development work – it was now recognised that there was much more frontline work, training and intervention required to deliver it successfully.
- There was no dedicated funding for this work – but consideration would be given to how best to use Council budgets.
- Further information would be provided regarding the receipt and spending of the asylum dispersal grant funding.
- Consideration was given to the interrelationship between the vulnerabilities cause by marginalisation, fear and domestic abuse. More

work was required to understand the issues related to families that had no recourse to public funds.

- Work would take place to further consider how best to engage with partners to ensure that providers of hotel accommodation (and the Home Office) were meeting their commitments.
- It was important that the Council worked with other boroughs of sanctuary to ensure that there was a joined-up approach to engaging with central government.

4.5 In the Committee discussion the following key points were also noted:

- Members were concerned about the potential gap between the Council's ambitions to be a borough of sanctuary – and some of the operational practice in service teams at the Council.
- Members would welcome risk assessment of some of the actions in the strategy – and how some of the areas of deficiency highlighted by AFRIL would be addressed.
- There was a recurrent concern amongst Members that the strategy was not fully embedded across all parts of the Council.
- The importance of ensuring that domestic abuse services were available for migrant women.
- The potential for developing a charter for refugees and asylum seekers.

4.6 **Resolved:** that the Committee would share its views with Mayor and Cabinet, as follows:

4.7 The Committee believes that the Borough of Sanctuary strategy is of vital importance to the Council's work supporting the most vulnerable. It welcomes the work being carried out to deliver the strategy and it recognises and commends the work being carried out by community and voluntary sector organisations to ensure that those seeking sanctuary are supported and protected from harm. Nonetheless, there are opportunities to ensure that the sanctuary strategy is more effective. The Committee recommends that:

- Mayor and Cabinet should reiterate and reinforce the Borough of Sanctuary messaging across Council departments. It is important that there is management support for the delivery of the strategy in all parts of the organisation.
- There should be an enhanced focus on the delivery of operational work to deliver the Council's Borough of Sanctuary ambitions. Members are particularly concerned about potential discrepancies in decision-making processes and the delivery of frontline services for those seeking sanctuary.
- An assessment of the training needs for frontline staff in relevant directorates (specifically in social care and housing) should be carried out. The prioritisation and development of this work might include input from community and voluntary sector partners who have experience of engaging with the Council – and of supporting vulnerable families and individuals.
- An update on the use of asylum dispersal funding should be provided to the Committee.

- There should be a risk assessment of the measures needed to ensure that the Council will be successful in its attempts to be recredited as a Borough of Sanctuary.
- A refugee and migrant champion should be appointed by the Mayor to act as a senior stakeholder and critical friend to the Council and its partners.
- Work should take place to communicate with Lewisham's partner organisations (including health, education and community safety) about what the Council expects of them in relation to the Borough of Sanctuary.
- Consideration should be given to the resources available for frontline work. Specific attention should be given to the funding available for community and voluntary sector organisations.
- Lewisham should work with its partners and with other local authorities to highlight the detrimental impacts of the Immigration and Asylum Act (1999) and the costs and harm caused by leaving people with no recourse to public funds.

5. Borough of Culture Legacy

5.1 James Lee (Director of Communities, Partnership and Leisure) introduced the report.

5.2 Councillor Mark Ingleby (Chair of Overview and Scrutiny) addressed the Committee – highlighting the importance of creativity and culture and emphasising the focus that he and others had placed on this area of work.

5.3 James Lee responded to questions from the Committee – the following key points were noted:

- Congratulations on the delivery of the borough of culture were welcomed- but James noted that the success was the result of an array of community partners and dedicated Council officers from across the organisation.
- There was lots of positive work in the borough that could be built on in future.
- Consideration would be given to ensuring that all parts of the borough were connected to the benefits of the borough of culture legacy.

5.4 **Resolved:** that the report be noted.

6. Select Committee work programme

6.1 The Committee discussed the work programme report – and put forward the following suggestions for consideration by the Committee in 2023-24:

- The single equalities framework and fairer Lewisham duty.
- Borough of Sanctuary: progress and feedback on the committee's recommendations;

6.2 **Resolved:** that the work programme report be noted – and that the suggestions put forward by the Committee be considered by the Committee's new membership in 2023-24.

The meeting ended at 21:05

Chair:

Date:
