

SCRUTINY BOARD (ENVIRONMENT, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES)

THURSDAY, 7TH DECEMBER, 2023

PRESENT: Councillor S Golton in the Chair

Councillors P Stables, B Anderson,
J Akhtar, P Grahame, J Tudor, A Hannan,
A McCluskey, A Rontree, S Seary, A Khan
and N Harrington

58 Appeals Against Refusal of Inspection of Documents

There were no appeals against refusals of inspection of documents.

59 Exempt Information - Possible Exclusion of the Press and Public

There were no items excluded from the public domain.

60 Late Items

There were no late items.

61 Declaration of Interests

There were no declarations of interest.

62 Apologies for Absence and Notification of Substitutes

Apologies were received from Cllrs A Maloney and P Grahame.

Apologies were also received from James Rogers (Director, Communities, Housing and Environment).

63 Minutes - 12 October 2023 and 6 November 2023

The minutes of the ordinary meeting on 12 October 2023 were approved as a correct record.

The minutes of the Call-In meeting on 6 November 2023 were approved as a correct record.

64 Matters Arising

The following issues were noted under matters arising:

Minute 44: The Chair has received an initial update from Alison Lowe (Deputy Mayor for Policing and Crime) following the Scrutiny Board's discussion about

the Mayor's Safer Communities Fund, which is funded through the proceeds of crime. It has been confirmed that in principle community committees would be able to apply to the Fund. However, the funding would need to be for a specific project which the committee themselves were delivering or delivering in partnership with a local group. No group or organisation can apply for funding for which they then have a separate decision-making process and which requires funding to be passported to another group.

Cllr Akhtar asked that it be noted that he welcomed this update.

Minute 45: The Scrutiny Board's conclusions and recommendations about future plans for community parks have been submitted to the Executive Board in the form of a Scrutiny statement and a response is expected in the new year.

Minute 46: The Principal Scrutiny Advisor provided an update on a response from the Head of Homelessness in relation to the number of veterans presenting as homeless.

65 Reducing Poverty & Improving Financial Inclusion

The Chair introduced the item noting that the Scrutiny Board had requested an annual update on work to reduce poverty and improve financial inclusion in Leeds.

Those in attendance for this item were:

- **Cllr M Harland** (Executive Member)
- **Lee Hemsworth** (Chief Officer, Community Hubs, Welfare & Business Support)
- **Jo Rowlands** (Financial Inclusion Manager)

- **Dianne Lyon** (Citizens Advice Leeds)
- **Hannah Bailey** (Voluntary Action Leeds)
- **Rifhat Malik** (Give a Gift)
- **Chris Joyce** (Department for Work and Pensions)
- **Gemma Sharratt** (Department for Work and Pensions)

Lee Hemsworth introduced the report, noting that poverty and financial exclusion have been deep-rooted challenges for many years. However, key factors affecting the financial climate since 2022 that have further escalated the situation, leading to a 'cost-of-living crisis'.

Members were advised that the Executive Board Report 'Understanding & addressing the Cost-of-Living Crisis' was appended to the Scrutiny Board report by way of contextual information.

Lee reiterated the importance of a partnership approach to the challenges of poverty and financial exclusion. He set out the focus of activity over the last 12 months, which has included communication, information, funding and advice. In addition, initiatives such as 'Welcome Spaces', the Zero Waste Winter Coats Appeal and Emergency Warm Packs have delivered practical support.

An update was provided in relation to themed strategic meetings which have taken place since June 2023. Topics have included housing, children's services, health, crime and community safety, third sector and crisis support.

The short term, often annualised, nature of funding streams in this area of work creates a risk for services, and the reality for all partners is that available resources cannot meet the demand for support.

Dianne Lyons described the "grim" situation for many people in Leeds and offered thanks to the staff and volunteers working at Citizens Advice Leeds. She raised concern about the behaviour of some energy firms in dealing with vulnerable customers and outlined the way in which her organisation can advocate for those individuals. Similarly, she provided examples of recovering unclaimed entitlements to a range of benefits, which can significantly improve the financial circumstances of some people.

Dianne highlighted escalating demand for services and confirmed funding has been sourced to increase capacity. Funding from West Yorkshire Combined Authority for the Leeds Advice Service has been used to increase staffing in the telephone team and recruit caseworkers to provide specialist advice in housing, benefits, employment and debt. Work is ongoing with Leeds MIND and Trussell Trust on one of six pilot projects in the country, to improve support for people experiencing mental health issues and financial difficulties.

Hannah Bailey welcomed the continuation of strong partnership arrangements in Leeds including via the Leeds Community Anchors Network. She noted that many third sector partners are in receipt of an allocation of the Household Support Fund in recognition of their trusted role and reach into communities, particularly for those less likely to engage with statutory services. Hannah also provided an overview of the Welcome Spaces network that has been developed for the winter period of 2023/24.

Rifhat Malik updated members on the work of the cultural food hub for East Leeds and involvement in projects including Healthy Holidays and Welcome Spaces. Rifhat described an upsurge in demand post-pandemic as a result of the cost-of-living crisis and expressed particular concern about the increase in referrals from schools on behalf of families. She highlighted challenges for vulnerable families including changing criteria at food banks, restrictions on crisis support and the need for the third sector to "step into the gap" to support communities. She expressed concern about future sources of funding in light of increased demand.

Chris Joyce acknowledged the strength of the partnership approach in Leeds and thanked city work coaches for the support they provide to people looking for employment in Leeds. He outlined the next stage of the roll out of Universal Credit, which is gradually replacing legacy benefits for people of working age. He informed members that migration notices will start to be issued to households in receipt of the other means tested benefits that Universal Credit will replace. He also provided an update on job centre relocation and the closure of three temporary jobcentres.

Members sought clarification about the timescales for the migration to Universal Credit and the difficulty of accessing city centre jobcentres for people living in the outer areas. Chris confirmed that where there is an identified need, staff can travel out to localities to provide support but there are limited resources available for such community-based work across the city.

In response to member queries Chris confirmed the support that is available for anyone struggling to respond to migration notices, including access to the Help to Claim service.

The Scrutiny Board welcomed the collaborative approach being taken in Leeds and thanked all partners for their work.

Clarity was sought about the use of relative poverty measures as opposed to referencing absolute poverty. Members were informed that data illustrating relative poverty is more accurate in this context.

Concern was expressed about the impact of the migration to Universal Credit for diverse communities where English is not a first language and for low-income families.

Members recommended exploring ways in which elected members can escalate concerns raised with them by constituents. Lee confirmed that there is an ambition to explore a more accessible route for referrals and officers are beginning to consider how that may work.

Members explored ways in which organisations could evidence the value of their work to help ensure finite resources are directed to the places where most impact can be achieved.

Other issues raised by elected members included:

- The inclusion of poverty indicators in the social progress index.
- The risks associated with the closure of temporary jobcentres.
- The impact of inflation on the cost of food provisions and energy.
- Uncertainty about the future provision of the Household Support Fund.
- Opening hours for community hubs. It was noted that this would be a subject for discussion as part of the budget consultation process.
- The importance of a place-based approach to support and funding.

- The challenge for elected members of signposting constituents to the right places to access support and advice.
- Examples of innovative community responses to the cost-of-living crisis.
- The way in which the DWP calculates the 'nearest' jobcentre for people to report into. It was confirmed that an extensive mapping exercise had taken place incorporating public transport routes, rather than a calculation 'as the crow flies.'
- The distribution of Welcome Spaces and ways in which to access further information about locations in Leeds.
- The importance of reflecting lived experience in the approach being taken by partners.

Members requested a future update on the work of Leeds Poverty Truth in relation to learning that has emerged from previous commissions, the ambitions of the latest commission and the Resourcing the City project with the city Council.

RESOLVED:

Members agreed:

- a) To examine the content of this report and to review the evidence and approach being taken in respect to reducing poverty, and improving financial inclusion in the city, with consideration as to the current cost of living crisis.
- b) To recognise that national economic factors and context are limiting the ability of the Council and financial inclusion partners to undertake actions and measures to reduce poverty in the city, thereby increasing the risk of more households experiencing poverty and destitution.
- c) To receive a further update in 2024/25.
- d) To invite Leeds Poverty Truth to a future meeting to discuss the 4th Commission and the Resourcing the City work with the Council.

66 Local Welfare Support Scheme Update

The Chair noted that the Scrutiny Board has previously requested an annual update on the Local Welfare Support Scheme in the context of concerns about the impact of the rising cost of living on citizens in Leeds.

Those in attendance for this item were:

- **Cllr M Harland** (Executive Member)
- **Lee Hemsworth** (Chief Officer, Community Hubs, Welfare & Business Support)
- **David Fryer** (Head of Welfare and Benefits)

David Fryer provided an overview of the most recent changes to the Leeds Welfare Support Scheme (LWSS). He noted that the intention of the scheme is to provide short term support to those experiencing crisis.

Members were advised that the scheme had been relaxed in response to the cost of living crisis to allow more low income families to access support.

However, increased demand meant that this extended model became financially unsustainable, even with additional funding from the Household Support Fund. During August 2023, the award criteria was therefore changed to reflect the original objective of crisis support. At the same time additional measures were introduced to help prevent fraud, improve consistency in decision making and ensure financial support was offered to those households who needed it the most.

David noted that there is still flexibility in the system and claimants have access to a clear dispute process. Members were reassured that unsuccessful applicants are always signposted to alternative sources of advice and support.

Members welcomed the approach to ensure that crisis support can continue to be provided in a way that is more financially sustainable. Concern was expressed about access to future funding given the importance of the Household Support Fund in enabling more families to be supported.

Members sought clarity about how citizens can apply for support and were updated about the development of an online form as an additional access route.

Further information was provided in relation to the prevalence of fraud. Officers reassured members that there is no evidence of widespread fraud but reiterated the importance of robust systems for governing the use of public money.

Other matters raised by members included:

- Changes to the Local Housing Allowance.
- The low uptake of national energy vouchers for people who are not accessing mains gas and electricity.
- The improved outcomes achievable via locally delivered schemes as opposed to promoting centralised schemes that do not necessarily reach those people who need support.
- Securing a partnership arrangement with a domestic appliance manufacturer to provide refurbished white goods to households in need.

RESOLVED:

Members of the Communities, Housing and Environment Scrutiny Board were asked to:

- a) Note the information contained within the report and the approach to delivering a financially sustainable LWSS.
- b) Note the contents of the enclosed eligibility criteria.
- c) Note the Action Plan and Next Steps set out at paragraph 29 of the report.

67 Community Committee Review

The Chair reminded colleagues that following the 2023 LGA Peer Review, the Executive Board agreed to carry out a review of Community Committees.

Subsequently, a commitment was made to update The Scrutiny Board (Environment, Housing & Communities) on the progress of that review and the feedback received through the associated member working group.

It was noted that Cllrs Golton and Anderson represent the Scrutiny Board on the working group.

Those in attendance for this item were:

- **Cllr M Harland** (Executive Member)
- **Paul Money** (Chief Officer, Safer, Stronger Communities)
- **Liz Jarmin** (Head of Locality Partnerships)

Paul Money outlined the background to the development of Community Committees and the progress with the current review. He highlighted the importance of listening to the views of members and the wider communities they represent. He also noted that the review may identify opportunities to standardise some of the ways in which Community Committees are supported in light of limited staffing resources.

Liz Jarmin provided members with an overview of the initial feedback from two member workshops that have taken place, which have focused on workstreams of the Community Committee Champions and Delegated Budgets. She welcomed the level of engagement from elected members and reflected upon the wide range of issues discussed.

Cllr Harland thanked members for their engagement and noted that there has been engagement with the review from a range of political groups and from members representing different geographies.

It was acknowledged that there are some challenging timescales associated with the first stage of the review. A report setting out the initial recommendations of the review will be presented to the Scrutiny Board in March 2024 ahead of consideration by the Executive Board.

Members raised concern about the potential impact of budget reductions on the work of community committees and on the scope of the review. It was agreed that there would be a need to make effective use of all available

sources of funding in future, which may include working in partnership to influence the use of funding streams such as elements of the Community Infrastructure Levy where that is available.

Members expressed concern about a lack of public engagement with community committees in some areas of the city and highlighted a need to improve representation. It was agreed that different approaches may be needed in different communities.

The Scrutiny Board recommended that members attending the upcoming workshop on community engagement and empowerment should explore examples of successful public engagement with a view to developing a 'toolbox' to support the members of the committees in this regard.

Members welcomed the opportunity to share experiences and examples of good practice across different committees. It was recommended that the review explores whether there is an appetite for an annual event for members to encourage the sharing of good practice on an ongoing basis.

Other issues raised by members included:

- Diversity of practice across different committees.
- Future scope to consider how community committee boundaries may be redrawn with the aim of being more co-terminus with the boundaries of other public bodies such as the health service or West Yorkshire Police.
- The potential use of a community forum mechanism to improve engagement.
- Opportunities to bring together parish and city councillors on a more frequent basis.
- The resource available in the communities team to support the review process.
- The accessibility of locations used for community committee meetings and the limited ability to webcast from community buildings.
- Ways in which to reflect a stronger ward-based focus in formal meeting cycles.
- The various role of different sections of the communities team.
- The scheduling of working groups and early access to agendas for the member working groups to enable representatives to canvas the wider views of board members.

Liz advised members that wider community consultation will take place in early 2024 but consideration will need to be given as to who is approached and how residents in particular can be effectively engaged in the process.

Cllr Harland concluded by encouraging members to engage with the review over the coming months and reiterated the importance of improving community engagement with the community committees.

RESOLVED:

The Scrutiny Board noted the content of the report and:

- a) Supported the review of Community Committees and their constitutional role in helping to shape and influence place.

68 Work Schedule

Members noted the draft work schedule for 2023/24.

69 Date and Time of Next Meeting

The next public meeting of the Scrutiny Board will take place on **25 January 2024 at 10.30am**. There will be a pre-meeting for all board members at **10.00am**.

Members were reminded that there would also be a remote working group taking place on **15 December 2023 at 8.30am**.