

Health scrutiny paper on cost of living and health equity

Context: Cost of living crisis

The current cost of living crisis has worsened the situation of people already living in poverty, will put more people into poverty and destitution, and will create wide ranging harms to society. The worst direct effects for some of our residents of the cost of living crisis will arise from destitution due to insufficient income, leading to:

- hunger and a lack of food
- cold, hypothermia and lack of light due to energy costs
- mental and physical ill health
- homelessness and housing
- long-term adverse impacts on children from growing up in poverty

The costs of living crisis will also have longer-term, systemwide negative impacts. The capacity of public and third sector organisations to support residents will decrease as their budgets are hit by inflation and their staff experience their own financial struggles. Meanwhile the numbers of people requiring support and the complexity of their needs will increase substantially. Businesses will see their costs increase but also consumer demand drop as people make savings. Any business closure will deepen the financial issues faced by their owners, employees and supply chains. Our communities may struggle to pull together and support each other, and instead look inwards to their own stresses and direct needs. Community cohesion and community organised resilience to crises may loosen, leading to even more severe impacts for residents and the borough more broadly.

London Borough of Hackney (LBH) has developed a Poverty Reduction Framework which sets out the council's strategic approach to poverty reduction. It aims to meet the immediate needs of people already in poverty whilst working towards preventing poverty for future generations. Whilst it was developed by LBH, it has wider applicability across the City and Hackney Place Based Partnership and many elements of it will require a partnership approach.

LBH have established four workstreams to respond to the issues and risks from the cost of living crisis, these are:

- Resident support
- Cost of doing business - support for and lobbying on behalf of local business
- Council staff and their finances - targeted support for Council staff
- Council's financial position and risks to service delivery

This paper provides a briefing on the work of the first programme area: *Support to residents*. This programme is being managed through a City and Hackney-wide group that brings together LBH, City of London Corporation, Homerton Healthcare, East London Foundation Trust, the voluntary sector and primary care. A group of partners have been meeting since May 2022, initially to consider an immediate crisis response. The City and Hackney Health

and Care Board previously agreed to invest some of their non-recurrent transformation funds into supporting this immediate crisis response.

More recently the approach has transitioned into a clearer programme structure that considers a medium term response to the crisis. This programme reports into the City and Hackney Health and Care Board (via the Neighbourhoods Health and Care Board) and into the LBH Corporate Leadership Team.

The following provides an overview of the work underway and a programme overview can be found [here](#).

Aims and scope of the programme

The causes and effects of poverty are varied and complex and the partnership response aims to reflect this. *The scale of the challenge however can not be matched by our actions locally.* What we can do is organise immediate support and create longer term changes, to relieve poverty and its effects for our residents as much as possible.

The aims of this programme are:

- ***On the individual level to better meet people's immediate material needs and offer more preventative help*** (aim 3 from poverty reduction framework)
- ***On a systemwide level to develop a more coordinated emergency support and advice offer, with more preventative help, and to make the case for a better benefits system*** (strategic objective under aim 3 from poverty framework)
- ***On a systemwide and longer term level***
 - **to ensure poverty reduction is a priority across the system** (aim 4 from poverty reduction framework)
 - **to help people on low incomes address all the issues which matter, not just the presenting issue** (aim 5 from poverty reduction framework)

There are a number of groups however where there is now particular concern with the cost of living crisis. [Analysis](#) has been conducted across a range of networks to establish the potential resilience of specific groups. This analysis indicates particular concern for the following residents:

- Those living in temporary accommodation, privately rented accommodation and houses of multiple occupancy;
- People who are socially excluded and those who lack trust in the state;
- Residents with long term conditions, acute illness or disabilities and those with caring responsibilities;
- Children and families who may not be receiving what they are entitled to or who are below the threshold for particular benefits;
- Older residents who are socially isolated and may not approach services for help and support.

Areas of work

The following four areas of work are being progressed to achieve the aims described above and to support those residents most at risk.

1. Co-ordinating a Systemwide response to cost-of-living crisis facing residents

1.1 A key aim of the programme is maintaining overall co-ordination of the various offers of support to ensure that they are complimentary and accessible, recognising that most of the support will be from partners that already have trusted relationships with residents, which is often in the voluntary sector or a trusted clinical professional.

Part of the co-ordination includes bringing together partners via the borough-wide Community Partnerships Network, which was established during the pandemic and brings together food and advice partners; as well as developing hyper-local place-based responses within each Neighbourhood.

As part of the immediate crisis response the Health and Care Board agreed £96k of funding to support the resilience of food banks over winter, with a specific focus on provision of culturally specific foods where there has been less provision (e.g. Halal or Kosher).

1.2 The work at Neighbourhood level has supported the mobilisation of warm spaces; a wide range of faith and community groups have expressed an interest in providing warm spaces to local residents. We have asked warm spaces to register on www.warmwelcome.uk so that there is a common, public register. This website also provides support and guidance to potential providers; to date 23 spaces have registered. Resident Participation at LBH have made available small grants to support warm spaces, a total of 14 organisations in Hackney were successful with grants totalling £39k. The Policy and Strategic Delivery team continue to work with the network of food partners in Hackney, and a network of 20 community infrastructure organisations funded through the grants programme (some of which are operating as warm hubs), to develop a more joined up offer. This includes place-based direct support to residents to address immediate needs created or exacerbated by the cost of living crisis and to prevent escalation of harm and need.

1.3 Opportunities for social prescribers and members of the Money Hub to be based in warm hubs are also being explored. Systems convenors liaised with Money Hub to identify VCS organisations that would be appropriate to host Money Hub's outreach work. Money Hub is now offering appointments at community infrastructure partner organisations such as African Community School. Other VCS organisations, such as North London Action for Homeless and Halkevi Turkish and Kurdish community centre, have had their offer to residents strengthened by the advice on accessing the support from the Household Support fund being delivered by Money Hub.

1.4 In support of the system wide response to the cost of living crisis, system convenors have been coordinating spaces for VCS organisations to broaden their understanding of their local network of support and create more meaningful relationships with each other. Part of this work has been meeting local VCS partners and hearing about their struggles around the cost of living crisis and what they are most worried about for residents. As part of this work, system convenors have been linking community organisations with each other,

identifying opportunities for collaboration with the council and acting as a navigator of the VCS for council teams. This work has resulted in collaboration and coordinating efforts with public health, housing management, temporary accommodation, Money Mub's outreach teams and children and family hubs.

1.5 Systems convenors have also been working with 20 community infrastructure partners funded by the Council's Grants Programme. These organisations share characteristics that include an ability to meet the holistic needs of residents and are therefore important partners for supporting residents with the cost of living and to learn about the early preventative work that they carry out on behalf of residents. Each partner has a Council based 'relational lead', with whom system convenors are also working to identify and overcome the barriers and constraints community partners experience when trying to work with statutory agencies, in order to provide the wrap-around support often needed by residents. They are now convening meetings with VCS partners and their matched Council relational leads based on geographical location to build place based, collaborative support for residents. The 20 VCS partners want to continue monthly meetings as a way of supporting each other to find solutions to residents' needs.

2. Equipping resident-facing staff

2.1 Our resident-facing staff need to be equipped to have honest and compassionate conversations with residents, offering them holistic support and knowing what is available to support them with financial pressures. This work also aims to build partnerships between colleagues in council services, health, the third or voluntary and community sector and other key resident-facing services which will have long term benefits across a range of agendas beyond just cost of living.

Key work to date includes regular partnership-wide communications describing what help is available and a fortnightly 'tools for front line practitioners' session that is open to all people working in City and Hackney to support residents. A direct referral route from health and care services for residents in need has also been established and went live with phase 1 on 20th February 2023.

2.2 Thirty two referral partners have been trained and can now access £200 in crisis funding for food and/or fuel for residents whose health, safety or wellbeing is significantly impacted by cost of living pressures. This support is available via funding from the DWP Local Authority's Household Support Fund (HSF), and is being distributed by the Family Fund portal. A total of £100,000 was set aside for this purpose for the current HSF round until the end of March 2023. Current spend is ahead of our projections, and provides an indication that the programme is an effective way of distributing support to residents in need. Currently, 25% of all referrals are from primary care via social prescribers, and feedback from Homerton and community based health services signed up to the programme is positive. This feedback is shared in weekly drop in sessions, which are there to address barriers and support services with key information. This helps enable the holistic strengths-based conversations they should be having with residents when making applications, and also helps connect them to wider support services across VCS, Council and health.

2.3 We are also working with resident-facing staff in the VCS sector. Through the Household Support Fund, £240,000 was distributed to 45 VCS organisations through Hackney Giving

from October 2022 to March 2023, for food and fuel support to residents. These included a majority of Haredi social welfare organisations, including organisations supporting residents with long-term disabilities, illnesses and mental health issues.

3. Crisis grants and income maximisation for those in financial distress - Hackney Money Hub

3.1 Background:

The LBH Money Hub launched in November 2022, and is jointly funded between LBH and the Health and Care Board, which made a £509k investment in the service to widen the remit of the team to focus on community and data-driven outreach work.

LBH awards one-off discretionary and crisis grants worth £1.6m a year through its local welfare assistance - the discretionary crisis support scheme (HDCSS), discretionary housing payments (DHP), additional support for those on council tax reduction already in arrears (CTRHDF), and now also the household support fund (HSF).

The Money Hub was formed in order to improve the accessibility and impact of these funds.

3.2 The team's objectives:

- **To create a single point of access:** so residents in financial distress only have to fill out one form, instead of four, to be considered for all grants
- **Using data and outreach to reach wider range of residents:** previously over 70% of these funds were awarded to social tenants, rather than reaching those in the private rental sector
- **Incorporate income maximisation work into awarding of these funds:** we know that a shocking £28m a year worth of benefits income is underclaimed by Hackney residents. By hiring staff with expertise in benefits uptake, and incorporating these checks into financial awards processes, we aim to increase incomes sustainably, not just issue one-off grants.
- **Build capacity across the system** to reduce the underclaiming of benefits - both by training staff in LBH, health and Council teams to spot underclaiming, and redesign services to ensure residents find it easier to claim what's theirs

3.3 Achievements during the team's first four months:

- Received applications from **2500 residents** - more than applied to the Council's discretionary funds in the whole of the previous year, with increased applications from Private Rental Sector tenants
- Distributed **£240k** in one-off grants to **635** households in immediate financial crisis - an average of **£370 per head**. The team is processing around £14k of grants a week.
- Sustainably increased **329 households' incomes by £248k**. These residents are an average of **£750** a year better off. The team is delivering £14.5k of increased benefits uptake every week.

3.4 Examples of outbound campaigns:

- **Community presence:** our outreach team are present in 2 community settings each week, recent events have included: Lubavitch Children's Centre, Sheperdfold Ministry, Hackney Carers event, Hackney Caribbean Elderly Organisation, and more
- **Targeting support for families with disabled children:** We've worked with children's social care to target fuel vouchers and benefits support to families whose children use medical equipment in the home and who are struggling financially.
- **Support for HH tenants whose boilers have been capped:** We've worked with the Gas Safety team to target fuel vouchers and holistic support to those whose boilers had been disconnected previously, to reconnect them and increase incomes.
- **Pension credit uptake:** We've targeted those who are in council tax arrears and underclaiming on pension credit - by calling them, helping them to apply, and then creating payment plans for the debt.
- **Early identification of homelessness:** We're identifying those in the PRS who have the highest housing benefit shortfalls and Council Tax debt, to offer DHPs, housing advice and income maximisation support.

Finally, we want to ensure we are not simply addressing the symptoms, but also the causes of these issues, and in April will convene a group to begin working on the key areas of policy and service redesign that will help poverty proof the Councils' services.

3.5 Evaluating impact

Return on investment

The Health and Care Board investment in staffing the team costs £9.7k per week. For this the team is delivering £14.5k of increased incomes for residents - a return on investment of £1: £1.49.

We expect this to increase over the coming months, and are on track to achieve our target of £1m worth of increased incomes in 12 months.

Feedback from residents and VCS

In March and April we will run a full round of resident and stakeholder research - to understand how we can continue to improve the service.

3.6 Next Steps

The funding for this service expires in October 2023, so we are starting to look at how the work can be funded to continue.

This will be informed by an initial evaluation with feedback from residents, stakeholders and an assessment of the financial outcomes.

New Household Support Fund guidance allows us to use the funds to invest in staffing benefits and debt advice so we are hoping to use this to cover some of the costs of the team.

4. Use of data and insight

To date, the programme has utilised feedback from front line staff, data from LIFT (a tool that shows uptake of benefits across the borough) and existing metrics related to poverty and deprivation to target its work. Healthwatch has also conducted a local survey of residents. The population health hub is now supporting the programme by developing more systematic mechanisms to use data and insight to identify those residents most in need, establish what type of support will bring the most benefit and measure impact.

Council and Health colleagues are also working closely, including within a system-wide strategic group on poverty reduction, to identify and use the data required to inform our response to cost of living. Data and insight, including from Money Hub, LIFT, and qualitative insights from stakeholders, is being used to address issues such as:

- Identifying populations struggling or in need of additional support
- Providing insight on what support might be needed by different populations, as well as using this to inform development of tailored communication materials and disseminating this through networks
- Identifying cohorts (and then potentially households) that would benefit from specific interventions (including outreach to increase uptake of e.g. disability benefit, fuel vouchers)
- Identifying cohorts that would benefit from existing services e.g. LBH moneyhub
- Monitoring the impact of interventions

5. City of London

The City of London are key partners within the programme and we have agreed that any service supporting Hackney residents can also support City residents. In addition, the Place Based Partnership have funded a 'Green Doctor' scheme (£50k) to support older people and those on benefits. The service provides home visits and makes immediate changes (such as installing energy efficient light bulbs or draft excluders) and can provide advice and sign post people to other types of support.

6. Free School Meals Task Group and Summit

In November 2022, the Director of Education and Inclusion (DoEI), Paul Senior, was commissioned by the Mayor to set up a task & finish group to explore the issue of food poverty in schools and explore local solutions to the issue. The group comprised Headteacher, local governors, voluntary sector organisations and local authority officers.

The task & finish group discussed extensively innovative ways of providing free meals or low cost meals to children that were nutritious and healthy. Local Headteachers spoke about ways they fund free school meals for all their pupils, for example through using income raised from lettings towards free school meals. Other areas explored included;

- The financial implications of providing FSM for all pupils; how other local authorities fund free school meals for children in their schools; the barriers to families accessing/applying for FSM; and what the local authority can do to promote the take up of FSM.
- The offer of free breakfast clubs to tackle food poverty
- Schools getting more value for money on food through group purchasing
- Looking into the work of the Chefs in School charity.

- Help available through the Council to support residents with the cost of living crisis.

The work of the task and finish group has now concluded. The Director of Education and Inclusion is in the process of drafting a report of the findings and recommendations from this work. The recommendations will include how the Council can use funding available to help tackle food poverty in education.

In February 2023, the Mayor of London announced his plans to provide funding for free school meals for all Primary school pupils in London for an academic year, from September 2023 to August 2024. In light of this announcement, the DoEI has had to rethink how to distribute the funding for the best outcome and to avoid duplication. The report will be finalised by the end of March.