

POLICY AND PERFORMANCE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

SCRUTINY REVIEW 2022-23 - COST OF LIVING CRISIS

DRAFT RECOMMENDATIONS

Developing our communications strategy by working in partnership with the voluntary sector

1. The Committee welcomes the wide range of support available to local people to help with the cost-of-living crisis, although considers that communication of the local offer, and communication between different council and voluntary sector services, could be more joined up. Services should review how the local offer of support is publicised to make the most of every contact that residents have with the council, its partners, and other support organisations. The review and associated action plan should be shared with the committee.
2. The Council should ensure that information on cost-of-living support is readily available in community languages based on demand and should target communications at relevant communities, particularly those where take up of cost-of-living support services is disproportionately low.
3. Islington Council should consider working with Voluntary Action Islington and Islington Giving to develop a master list of all community groups and Tenant and Resident Associations working in the borough, building on existing resources, and use this for disseminating comprehensive information on cost-of-living support.

Food support

4. The Committee welcomes the range of different organisations providing food support in the borough, including food banks, food co-operatives and others, and considers that Islington Council can play an important role in supporting these organisations in their work. It is recommended that information about all projects in the borough including eligibility criteria and location is compiled and shared with partner organisations and the community and voluntary sector in order to facilitate referrals.

5. The Council should review how it can best support food organisations in their work, linking to scoping work already carried out by Islington's Food Partnership. This review should include exploring options for facilitating bulk buying, storage opportunities, and how vehicles can be accessed by the voluntary and community sector to help transport food, while ensuring a maintained focus on supporting residents through a cash first principle and progressive procurement. Bulk-buying opportunities should focus on culturally-appropriate foods, which may be less readily available to those on lower incomes.
6. Islington Council should continue to engage with organisations that support food cooperatives such as the Islington Food Cooperative Network, as well as expanding its work with other organisations such as Cooperation Town. The Council should promote and, as appropriate and subject to funding, support the creation of new food cooperatives; including through the establishment of a hub from which cooperatives could potentially collect surplus food and local organiser(s) that could do community outreach and encourage uptake of the model. Any hub should link closely with existing local food surplus provision, The Felix Project and City Harvest.
7. To ensure the council's food support offer is joined up and comprehensive, a single officer should serve as the point of contact for the above and as part of the council's response to the Islington Food Strategy 2023-28. To further help Manor Gardens to coordinate the Islington Food Partnership this officer should with compile a yearly summary of what the council has done to meet to Food strategy.

Energy efficiency

8. To ensure that residents are provided with clear advice on how best to reduce their energy consumption, the Council should review its website content on energy efficiency, with clear advice set out by housing tenure (tenants, leaseholders, private rented sector, owner/occupier) on the steps that could be taken to make their homes more energy efficient.
9. Islington Council should explore opportunities for the creation of community laundry facilities and drying lines, learning from the pilot at the Andover Community centre, and working in partnership with organisations such as churches and mosques, so that these are linked to existing groups and facilities.

10. The Committee welcomes the work of SHINE in providing energy efficiency advice to local residents. It is recommended that the information provided by SHINE is reviewed by the council's Housing services to ensure that advice on saving energy (i.e. turning down the heating) is nuanced, so it does not inadvertently contribute to damp and mould issues.
11. The Committee notes the challenges of the current energy market and that there is little advantage to residents switching energy provider at the current time. However, it is recommended that the council monitor developments in this area, in order to provide advice to residents on when it may be best to switch provider.

Financial Support Schemes

12. The Committee welcomes the wide range of financial support the Council has made available to local residents. To make the most of opportunities to provide help and support, the council should as far as possible adopt a "right first time" approach in which residents only have to contact the council once to be provided with information on the full offer of support available to them.
13. The Council should review opportunities for simplifying the application process for financial support schemes, for example by using information the council already holds on residents to minimise the need for resubmitting information.
14. To ensure that financial support is paid to residents promptly, the Council should consider the feasibility of monitoring the timescales taken for financial support to be awarded/paid from the point of initial enquiry. This may help to identify opportunities for expediting processes where possible.
15. In line with the council's commitments to Challenging Inequality, the council should review if all of the borough's communities are making equitable use of the Resident Support Scheme, and should develop action plans to address any gaps identified.
16. The Council should consider if the Resident Support Scheme application process can be simplified, and should carry out a review in partnership with service users, to ensure that the voices of residents who have navigated the system are heard and learning can be implemented. This should also consider which organisations are able to make a referral to the Resident Support Scheme.

17. In light of the closure of Bright Sparks the Council should urgently review the support available for purchasing white goods and how this can be aligned with progressive procurement principles.
18. In order to increase awareness of the Resident Support Scheme, leaflets should be distributed to all community venues, food projects, GP surgeries, and other health settings. The Committee would particularly support engagement with settings offering mental health support services, due to the link between debt and mental health.
19. The Council should review how the Hardship Fund agreed as part of the 2023/24 budget setting process is positioned and promoted, particularly as those in receipt of Universal Credit are not eligible for an award under the scheme.
20. The Council should consider the resources available to the Income Maximisation (IMAX) team and identify whether any additional funding is available to increase outreach work in venues such as libraries and community settings.
21. The Council should continue to develop and consult on options for adjusting the Council Tax Support Scheme. The Committee would support a move to a banded scheme with more targeted support of up to 100% subsidy for the most vulnerable residents.
22. The Council should provide clearer information on the winding down of the We Are Islington service and the transition to the new Here to Help team, and what this means for local people and referring organisations.

Support to tenants in the Private Rented Sector

23. The Council should review how support and advice services are promoted to tenants in the private rented sector, as it is thought that there is a lower awareness of the services available among this group. The Council should engage with organisations such as the London Renters Union, ACORN and Lettings Agents to ensure that information is widely available.