

Wandsworth Cost of Living Commission 6th Evidence Gathering Session

Date: 7th September 2023 at 14:00

Venue : Putney Library 5-7 Disraeli Rd, London SW15 2DR

Objective : The objective of the session was:

- To review evidence for the Housing , Transport themes and finalise to the Commissions choices for final recommendations for systemic change to support those facing the cost-of-living crisis in
- By the end of the session, to develop draft final recommendations each for Housing and Transport themes that the Commission will be including in its final report to the Council, its partners, residents, and the community.

Attending the meeting

- Ian Tattum (Joint Chair)
- Toby Costain
- Cathy Warwick
- Tylor Maria Johnson
- Keziah Gordon

Apologies

- Gillian Norton
- Alex Colas
- Tim Lang
- Dorian Leatham
- Lauren James
- Beverley Corson
- Kath McDonnell
- Arshad Daud
- Cllr Akinola

Wandsworth Council Officers

- Peter Quirk Secretariat
- Alice Addison Secretariat
- Martina Kane Housing and Regeneration Directorate
- David Tidley Environment and Community services Directorate

EVIDENCE

1. Welcome - Joint Chair

The Joint Chair introduced the speakers , commissioners and provided a summary of the workshop approach to the session, including a summary of the evidence gathered to date and the key lines of enquiry for each theme .

2. Focus groups summary report

The independent facilitator Elizabeth Lynch provided a detailed summary of the approach and findings from the six focus groups. The focus group discussions formed part of the Commission's call for evidence on its key areas of focus, the impact of the rising cost of food, housing, fuel, and transport. Members and service users of six Wandsworth community groups and organisations were invited to take part in 2.5-hour workshops between June and September 2023.

The challenges and adaptations that people are making are summarised below. Please note that the findings reflect the fact that not everyone is aware of what is available to them locally and that provision varies in different borough neighbourhoods.

The Cost of Living crisis has exacerbated existing hardship. People who are experienced at living on a small income are now constantly re-budgeting. The precarity of their financial situation is having an impact on many people's mental health, causing depression and panic attacks not previously experienced. Any small financial cushion has been stripped away.

Across all the groups people indicated eliminating treats and eating out with family, reduced support for adult children and grandchildren and a limiting impact on their social lives. People's income is mostly going on rent and bills and so food and transport costs are where they cut back. Organisations and their people want to work with the Council to address changes in communication, how information is shared and to collaborate on solutions. They also would like to support the Council to lobby and advocate for solutions that need to be delivered by central government, businesses, and national agencies.

Food

- Increased cost of food especially essentials
- Extra difficulties for people on special diets
- Healthy food more expensive
- Temporary accommodation- low standard of housing .
- Impacts and adaptations- using yellow labels, use of food banks, going without meals especially elders and people living alone. Harsh impact on single parent families with teen children. Hard to keep food fresh etc.
- FSM- problem with anonymity, stigma around this
- Council work with schools to ensure all have a breakfast club
- Food waste- strategic approach to reduce waste and benefit people on low incomes

Housing/energy

- Repairs
- Overcrowding
- Damp and mould problems
- Issues with private landlords in blocks with council and housing associations- who takes responsibility.

- Need joined up info to housing repairs etc
- Energy increase in costs
- Insulation kits
- Young people- more info on access to services and benefits, in surgeries and in youth clubs
- Vulnerable and disabled- build on data with VCS communicate better
- Older people- better system to downsizing council accommodation
- Cap energy prices

Transport

- Roehampton issues with public transport. Arriving late for school and work.
- Bikes not an option for many, no storage.
- Travel discounts for young people- multiple and confusing e.g., bus v train. Flat fare rate for school children agreed between TfL and national rail companies.
- Carers need transport support, access to discounts, free or discounted travel
- Better functioning taxi service for the disabled
- Council use data better to sort freedom pass for carers
- Access to leisure facilities for 26 years plus

4. Public survey and Call for evidence summary update:

The Commission Secretariat provided a summary of the approach and key findings from the survey and call for evidence . The survey was used to collect resident responses around a set of questions, looking at both the impact of the cost-of-living crisis and peoples thoughts and insights on solutions that the council and partners could consider. The survey ran from March to April 2023. There were 56 responses in total to the consultation. The following provides a summary of the responses.

Fuel:

- Reduce the amount of time the heating is on Not turning in heating, and trying to reduce oven use
- 'Limiting the length of time, I put my heating on which is quite dangerous after health treatments
- Switching off heating and electricity outlets, avoiding cooking and showering no more than once or twice a week
- 'I am disabled & have several aids requiring electricity - having to cut back I have not had a bath since the summer! Just to have a bath I have to use the electric hoist to get in & out bath, put the heating on plus the cost of hot water.'
-

Food:

- Cut down on food, find cheaper options, look around, Not buying fresh fish or meat.
- Buying the cheapest and low-quality food. Avoid buying fresh veg and fruit.
- Not celebrating holidays, relying on the Roehampton food box even more.

- 'Using food banks and food vouchers, I am in rent arrears now and going to be made homeless as I can't afford to renew my tenancy agreement.'

Transport:

- Transport is very tricky and expensive, still don't know how to tackle it.
- Walking several bus stops, travelling hours on the bus so avoid the tube and train. Not going anywhere.
- Not going even to the free museums due to the traveling costs.

The Commission also carried out two calls for evidence, circulating a range of specific questions and an open comment format to different organisations from local community groups to policy experts, think tanks, and regional and central government peers. The Commissioners were provided with a summary of the responses received.

5. Transport theme emerging recommendations

Joint chair introduced the transport session work shop focusing on the key areas of Cost, Accessibility and Safety .

Key issues

- People using buses and walking due to affordability
- Look more at transport policy as a whole
- Are we making best use of capacity that we have in terms of transport routes and options
- Buses in Roehampton- cut off travel options by closure of hammersmith bridge
- Bus, walking cycling and car strategy- includes environment and accessibility. Discounts for those in low income households
- Definitions of those giving free travel
- Issue with big ULEZ EV cars, many low-income households cannot afford the cost of vehicle

Suggestions for solutions:

- For elderly and disabled people- support network through schemes, e.g., freedom pass well-received. Layer of population on low incomes that sits outside the degree of support, so consider options to include them.
- Low-income households use more bus and walk options, . Not many uses bike despite it being affordable so possibly work to encourage cycling.
- Lobbying discretionary fares
- Consider cost freezing and discretionary travel. Develop a lobby position, questioning, are your travel services meeting the needs of the people who most need them? funding, same funding. Us can do this as independent. Sense of community being divided. Lobby for TFL to consider if travel financial support to meets low-income needs.
- Could Wandsworth produce a pass that could be used on TFL? The challenge would be financial, costs of freedom pass is significant

- Roehampton: Schemes on bike loans. But ability to store bikes on estates is a challenge. Hangar on street is pay to use, in Roehampton this is unaffordable.
- On re-looking at transport networks within the borough, e.g., bus networks. Especially to Roehampton.
- Cars- encouraging car groups? Support ability of people to use a car every now and again, support those who might not be able to swap between cars
- Why do people need to travel? To get between two sectors, so the solution is to build more shops, infrastructure, and essential services locally that people can walk, which would also overcome isolation in Roehampton.
- Santander and other electric bike schemes are only in north areas of the borough.

Additional evidence Wandsworth Community Transport

The organisation provided a summary of the work that they do and some of the key issues they come across . In particular stressing the reciprocal benefits of “ getting out and about” including contribution to improving mental and physical health and well-being . The organisation made the following suggestions for consideration by the commission :

- A grant request for making shopping transport free for 6 months(as people are not going out, not going shopping because people can't afford it so this would provide temporary boost) .
- Look at options for pilots for temporary free travel for certain groups followed by a review to determine if people would they carry on using it if there was a fare, how it helps them etc, impact.
- Revisit previous Council free summer days out programme linked to WCT disabled support programme .
- Involve WCT in transport planning for people with disabilities and access issues (lived experience) .

6. Housing theme emerging recommendations

Pat Turnbull on behalf of London Tenants Federation : Provided an impassioned statement of the issues tenants in London in the current market.

Key messages

- Percentage rent rise and food is creating a huge pressure on household budgets
- There is a need to ensure homes are well maintained + encourage Council Housing association to do the same
- Many tenants are in less that acceptable conditions + overcrowding, not just in the PRS, but also in the social rented sector
- Only solution is the provision of more social housing, cheapest and most secure
- Developers to provide social housing affordable in London plan

- Resolve the backlog for social rented housing.
- Focus on using space well- not commercial/shops, use for housing

Suggestions for solutions:

- Building new housing focusing on social housing
- Support those facing homelessness and in temporary accommodation, ensuring housing provided is good quality.
- Reporting rogue landlords and more regulation in the private rented sector
- Cross referencing EPC and ensuring they are of a good quality installation

Housing theme discussion

Joint Chair Ian Tattum introduced the workshop session looking at housing theme , initially focusing on evidence gather to date , key lines of enquiry and housing data sets . The following issues and recommendations were considered .

Key issues

- Private rented sector
 - Issue of short let stays taking up local housing stock, example of New York- banning AirBnBS
- Issue of not enough housing stock, creating supply and demand cycle of rising prices
- These costs are compounded by low energy efficiency of housing stock and the associated structural issues :
 - Develop cross working on the EPC of properties etc- investigate them in private rented sector and ensure installation quality is good. This includes more regulation.
 - Barriers in retrofitting blocks. Issue with funding for retrofitting- mixed tenure, don't qualify for the funding, % leaseholders against tenants etc.

Recommendations

- Council should focus on retrofitting all of its own stock
- Focus on building social housing
- Look at ideas that work in PRS in other places , for example exploring options for council to acquire housing
- Consider options for a rent cap

Other issues:

- Affordable childcare- working parents with early years age children have access to. Private sector given money from government, which don't fit the need- rec, have designated childcare facilities, which are built with a not-for-profit way of working- bring back into public ownership. Is there an infrastructure there within civil society?
- Need to look at more flexible working and employment option for those on low income with childcare needs

- Suggestion to explore joint funding with NHS for childcare support in order to support workforce challenges.

The evidence gathering session closed at 17:30 .