

Scrutiny & Overview Committee

Community Meeting on Residents Experience of Council Tax Payment, Collection and Enforcement

Monday, 26 September 2022

Summary

As part of its focus on the Cost of Living Crisis, there was due to be a report on Council Tax Payment, Collection & Enforcement included on the agenda for 7 September meeting of the Scrutiny & Overview Committee. Following contact being made from several local community groups representing residents, highlighting negative experiences of the Council Tax enforcement process, the Committee agreed that consideration of this item would be deferred to their next meeting on 18 October 2022.

In deferring the item, it gave Members the opportunity to arrange a separate meeting to hear directly from residents and community groups about their experience with Council Tax collection and enforcement. This report provides a summary of the feedback received at that meeting, which was held online at 7.00pm on Monday, 26 September 2022.

The Committee would like to put on record its thanks to all the residents and community groups who attended the meeting. We particularly want to thank Rhiannon Hughes at the South West London Law Centre for helping to connect us with so many residents. Their frequently moving testimony provided at the meeting was incredibly powerful and will be used by Members to inform their questioning when the item is formally considered by the Committee at its meeting on 18 October.

The feedback provided at the meeting predominately related to individual cases and in line with what was agreed at the meeting, this summary will focus on the key themes highlighted during the meeting.

Communication and Advice

A reoccurring issue raised by residents was the challenge of understanding the process related to the collection of Council Tax arrears, which might often be a contributory factor leading to the escalation of the collection process. It was agreed that having a clear explanation of residents' rights, options, and available Council Tax Relief (e.g Single Person Discount, Student Exemption) available from an early stage in the process, might prevent cases escalating to the point of enforcement. It was the experience of some residents that communications before the escalation to enforcement action had been limited, and in some cases, residents believed that they had already agreed payment plans with the Council.

It was accepted that the Council may not have resources available to substantially increase the level of advice and support for residents with Council Tax arrears in-house. However, as an alternative it was suggested that there could be an improved level of partnership working with external organisations, such as the Citizen's Advice Bureau (CAB) and the South West London Law Centre, who would be able to

provide residents with informed advice. The concern about the adequacy and availability of advice was repeatedly stressed, particularly since the loss of the Council's Welfare Rights Service.

Residents reported that it could often be a challenge getting through to an officer at the Council to discuss their case, which delayed the process of finding a resolution. It was acknowledged that contacting the Council was an issue, although the recent upgrade to the telephony system had resulted in a higher number of calls, which hopefully indicated that the problems residents experienced in contacting the Council, were improving. It was highlighted that for residents with English as a second language, telephone conversations could be difficult to comprehend and that a face-to-face meeting could have led to better outcomes in some cases.

Enforcement

There were reports that the enforcement contractors used by the Council were perceived to be behaving in an intimidating manner and did not seem to be taking account of the vulnerabilities of residents. It was noted by attendees that this may result in discrimination against groups with particular needs. The meeting heard that each of the contractors used by the Council should have specialist personnel who were experienced in providing welfare support, but this may be an area for the Committee to seek further reassurance at its meeting in October.

One resident suggested that there did seem to be a 'pursue first and check later' approach used by the enforcement agencies that had real consequences for their mental health. Similarly, it was the experience of some residents with multiple debts to the Council, e.g., outstanding parking fines, that collection agents were sometimes unclear on which debt they were enforcing, and this led to additional frustration and an increased the opportunity for misunderstand for residents.

It was highlighted that there was a 'dead link' in one of the enforcement letters sent to residents by the Council. It was agreed that this would be investigated and corrected.

Culture

A significant number of residents in attendance reported concerns about the culture around communication and enforcement. This was often considered to be disrespectful and sometimes threatening. Examples given included: -

- a resident being told to "Shhhh" when on the phone explaining their case,
- another told of being publicly shamed by enforcement officers in front of their neighbours,
- another spoke about being told to find 'someone else' to help with filling in complex forms.

These reports seemed to give the sense that residents were treated as numbers to fit a box rather than as individual human beings with unique needs and circumstances. The Head of Service in attendance at the meeting suggested revisiting training in partnership with residents as one solution. Another proposed

suggestion was a 'mystery shopper' approach to council tax enforcement that would enable officers to do random checks on services to make sure they were operating efficiently and respectfully.

Other Issues Highlighted

There was a concern amongst all present that this crisis may grow as a result of the cost of living crisis. One leading advice service confirmed that council tax arrears were the biggest source of debt enquiries, above energy and rent concerns, and that they expected this to grow.

It was agreed that further clarity was needed on Houses of Multiple Occupation (HMO), as it should be a landlord paying the Council Tax for an HMO property. It was highlighted that there were cases where each individual in an HMO was receiving a Council Tax bill. It was agreed that further information would be provided so this could be verified.

One voluntary organisation leader reported that service charges from hostel accommodation charges were operating in a similarly poor manner, which was resulting in homelessness. This will be picked up for further investigation by the relevant sub-committee.

There was a suggestion that there could be better coordination between the Council Tax department other parts of the Council. If this was the case, then other issues such as residents being entitled to benefits or potential vulnerabilities could be picked up at an early stage and taken account of as part of the process.