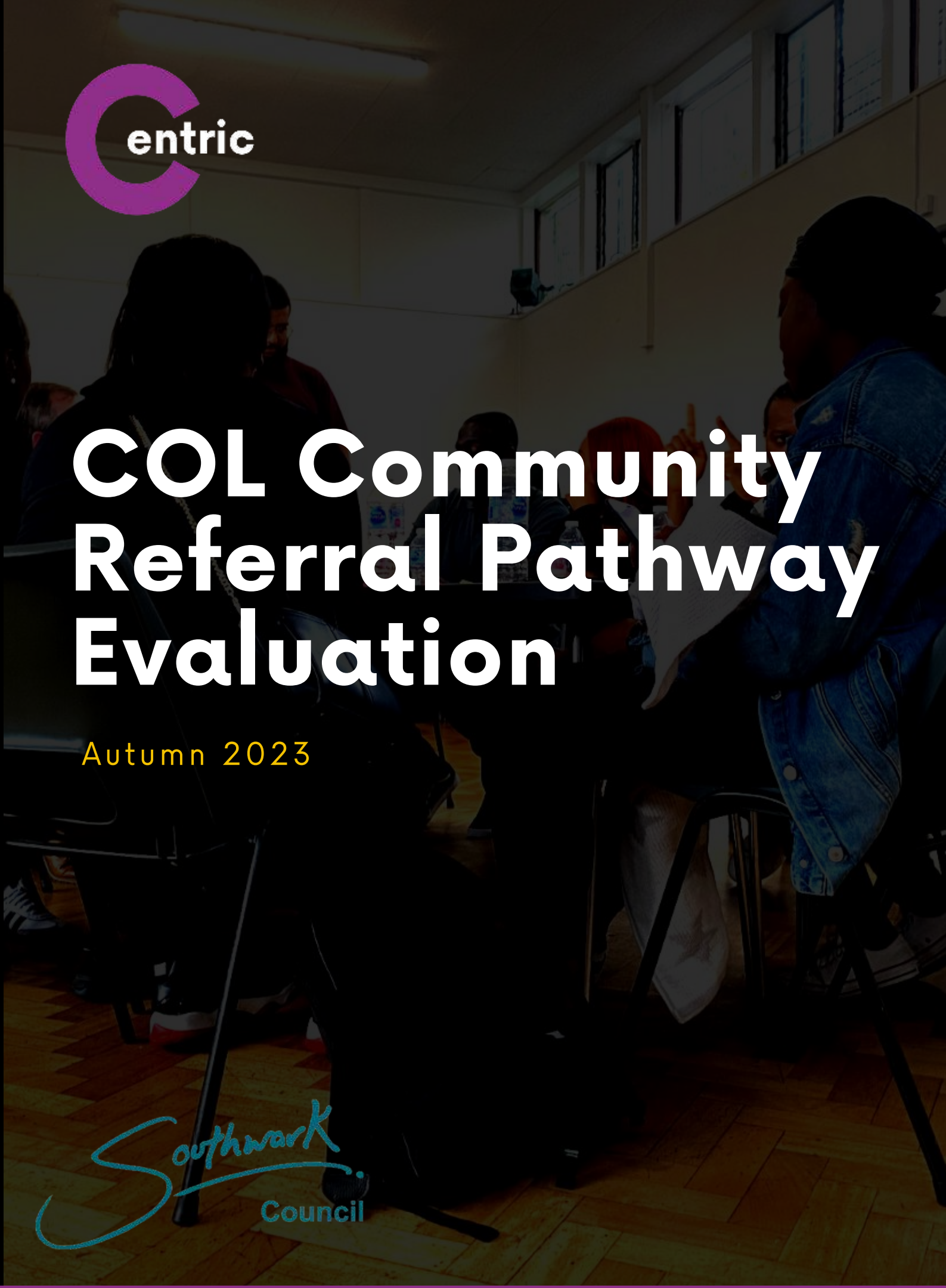


COL Community Referral Pathway Evaluation

Autumn 2023

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Executive Summary

In 2022, the Council declared the Cost of Living Crisis its top priority for the coming year and created a new Cost of Living Fund to provide urgent help with bills for low-income residents. The exceptional circumstances of the crisis demanded a bold and innovative response, and the Council intended to place the dignity of residents at its heart by, for example, adopting a Cash First approach. The fact that support was to be targeted primarily at low-income households who were not claiming means-tested welfare benefits was another novel aspect of the Council's response.
This evaluation draws on community research and reflects the unvarnished views of residents, some of whom received support and others who did not. It also reflects the views of partners with which the Council worked to help distribute Cost of Living support.

The Council is to be acknowledged for providing a voice to residents from communities whose voices are too often unheard and for engaging constructively with the feedback received – positive and negative. It is pleasing to note the Council's acceptance of the recommendations in this report. The full list of recommendations and the Council's response may be found on page ##

The overall conclusion from the evaluation (and the findings from the Policy in Practice report that complemented it) are that the community referral pathway and resident application route were successful. Thousands of residents received vital support when most needed. This was widely distributed and effectively allocated, with evidence suggesting that it reached those at greater risk. The highest level of support was given to those residing amongst the borough's most deprived neighbourhoods. The majority of recipients reported positive experiences of the support provided.
Centric recognises the limitations upon the Council insofar as the support provided to its residents. However, lessons can still be learned as it prepares to fully reopen its Cost of Living Fund this coming autumn and winter.

A number of residents doubted the Council's potential to provide Cost of Living Support, and, although many subscribed to the offer, there remained a degree of scepticism. Previous negative experience for residents engaging with the Council is likely to have influenced attitudes. This was a barrier to some of those who might have reached out for support. For others, the experience of refusal regarding previous applications served as a deterrent to seek support on this occasion.

Additionally, Council communication regarding its Cost of Living Fund was occasionally obscured by the publicity of other better-resourced campaigns. For example, the UK government used national media and social media channels to actively promote its Cost of Living support. Residents were often confused by the plethora of similar schemes which resulted in them failing to take advantage of additional funding available to them. Furthermore, such campaigns may have inadvertently led to some residents mistakenly considering themselves ineligible to access the Fund.

Executive Summary Cont.

The Council continues to be aware of these challenges. Indeed, these are among the reasons why the Council works with numerous VCS partners to improve the Community Referral Pathway established to provide better accessibility to the Cost of Living Fund. Although the success of the pathway was highlighted by subsequent evidence obtained, residents and VCS feedback revealed particular areas for improvement.

However, even the more renowned and trusted partners remained unknown to some residents in their respective neighbourhoods, leading to a degree of scepticism as to their authenticity as referral partners.

Centric identified that the most effective partners were able to provide access to the Fund among residents' within their immediate communities and networks, despite the likelihood of overwhelming demand and the potential reduction of the quality of resident experiences. There was a lack of uniformity insofar as it related to identifying credible partners across the borough, resulting in underserved communities. This was most apparent among the Latin American community, many of whom were unaware of the Fund's existence. Those who submitted unsuccessful applications were often unaware as to why they were denied support.

In order for the Council to more clearly define the type of Cost of Living support available via the Community Referral Pathway, it is important to emphasise who is eligible, when they can apply, and where they can access these details. Unsuccessful applicants should be notified immediately upon their applications being declined, explaining the reason/s for rejection. This should form part of a wider campaign to raise awareness of the Fund and distinguish it from other forms of Cost of Living support. Recognising resident's observations regarding the power of social media applications as effective communicative tools, the Council would be well advised to develop these aspects as part of its communications strategy.

VCS organisations recognised for their reach among underserved communities should be identified and encouraged to engage with the Council as partners, publicising their role and how residents who require support can access them. A diverse range of referral partners involved in the pathway, including faith and community leaders would widen the availability of the Fund to ensure support is more effectively communicated across the diverse communities of Southwark. This may also reduce the risk of partners becoming overwhelmed or the quality of residents' experiences being compromised.
The Council and others that support and work with VCS in Southwark should actively support this process to ensure the successful relaunch of the Community Referral Pathway this autumn and winter.

Summary of Recommendations

This report contains 19 recommendations. The first 15 are for Southwark Council to improve the Community Referral Pathway for residents and referral partners this winter and autumn. A further 4 recommendations have been developed for referral partners who join the Community Referral Pathway to consider. Further details and the Council's responses to the first 15 recommendations developed by Centric are linked below.

Recommendations for Residents

1. Coordinated Communications Approach
2. Raising Awareness and Advertising
3. Accessibility for Non-English Speakers
4. Eligibility for Support
5. Centre for Support
6. Vulnerable Groups
7. Place-Based Approach to Engagement
8. Intelligence-led Approach

Recommendations for VCS

9. Public Acknowledgement & Endorsement of Partners
10. Starter Pack for Referral Partners
11. Cost of Living Partner Feedback Forum
12. Wider Support for Partners
13. Application Updates
14. Engaging Faith Groups
15. Mapping and Engagement of Off-stage Organisations (Medium/Long-Term)

Recommendations for Referral Partners

16. Coordinated Communications Approach
17. Preparation for Launch
18. Signposting
19. VCS Organisations Representing Underserved Communities

Introduction

In October 2021, the Government closed or withdrew the major financial support measures for households it had introduced at the start of the COVID pandemic. The furlough scheme closed and the £20 a week uplift for all Universal Credit claimants ended. At peak, more than seventy thousand Southwark workers had been furloughed and another forty thousand plus households had benefited from the Universal Credit uplift.

In autumn 2021, the Government announced a new Household Support Fund to mitigate the impact of the sudden withdrawal of financial support measures for households. The Fund was worth £500m and would cover the period October 2021 to March 2022. It would be allocated to local authorities in England and the devolved administrations for Scotland and Wales. Southwark Council's allocation from the new Fund was £2.74m. At the same time as Government withdrew COVID financial support measures, there was increasing turmoil in international energy (gas) markets. Surging wholesale gas prices led to the failure of a string of smaller retail energy suppliers in the UK and what was at the time, the largest-ever increase to the statutory energy price cap – up by 11% from October 2021. Further and much larger increases in energy prices were widely forecast to take effect in 2022. [2]

The Council announced a new Southwark Cost of Living Fund for the second half of the year, adding another £3.5m to the original £5m and bringing the value of the fund to £8.5m for the year 20232/23. SCOLF 2 included the Council's new allocation from the Government Household Support Fund.

Government plans to focus support provisions at households claiming means-tested benefits (about forty-five thousand households in the borough) led to a pivot in the Council's priorities away from households claiming means-tested welfare benefits towards other households on low incomes but not claiming means-tested benefits. This followed an analysis by the Council's Public Health team (July 2022) [3] that had identified low-income households not claiming benefits as the cohort of residents at greatest risk of hardship in the winter. Additional help would be available for low-income households claiming means-tested welfare benefits with children in the form of holiday-free-school meals. For other low-income households that were not claiming means-tested welfare benefits, the challenge was one of identifying them and ensuring they had access to support.

The Council would meet those twin challenges in two ways. First, by reviving and scaling up the Community Referral Pathway that was first used in the winter of 2021/22. Second, it would open a resident application route so that vulnerable households could apply directly to the SCOLF. In both cases, support would be focused on mainly vulnerable low-income households that were not claiming means-tested benefits.

The Community Referral Pathway

The Cost of Living Fund developed by Southwark Council was intended to help meet the needs of low-income households (whether claiming welfare benefits or not) who found themselves unable to pay for food, energy, or other necessities.

The Community Referral Pathway employed the help of Community Southwark to engage and recruit more than 60 VCS organisations who became active partners over the winter period and referred residents who submitted applications to receive payments. Post Office Payout Vouchers valued at £100 were issued to successful applicants via post or email. It was agreed that 1 payment per household would be issued, a policy that was revised in the new year to allow for 2 payments per household. Referral partner's roles were not officially publicised. However, news spread via word of mouth and social media, leading to an increased volume of applications in the new year.

From the launch in October 2022 up until the closure of the pathway in March 2023, Almost 19,000 people applied for or were referred to support from the Cost of Living Fund – with demand peaking in February 2023. More than 4 in 5 of those referred or applying were given support. Roughly 1 in 10 of all Southwark households got support last winter – and evidence from the Policy in Practice report found that support was able to reach low-income households across the borough of Southwark. Nonetheless, evidence from the Policy in Practice report and Centric's initial interim report indicated that residents in Latin American communities were underserved and may not have had the same level of access to the fund as others. This may have further impacted residents who do not speak English as a first language, unable to acknowledge their eligibility for payment in communications being sent out.

It is important to note that support from the Fund was available for anyone on a low income and at risk of hardship. The Council's policy this year is fundamentally unchanged - to continue to support those who are at greatest risk and unable to pay for day-to-day necessities. The Council expects to support a similar number of households this winter but wants to ensure that the support provided is more evenly spread and more inclusive of the communities and households who need it most. Based upon Centric's report, the Council will be considering amendments to how the Fund and Community Referral Pathway function to improve experiences for both residents and referral partners.

Centric Approach

Centric Community Research is a Research Hub developed, owned, and operated by the communities of Lambeth and Southwark. Informed by a history of racism and discrimination against people of colour and our lived experience of racial inequities that we still face to this day, we aspire to empower diverse communities of colour across the urban landscape. Our communities and researchers are important to the work we do.

Why Centric

- Centric trains and upskill the local community researchers with no previous experience in research methods, thereby creating capacity and capability for local communities.
- Centric are part of the communities we serve, which means we have access to in-depth insight and are trusted by a demographic who are weary of always being researched by outsiders.
- Our team has a diverse range of both lived and learned skills and expertise and a founding team of researchers from different cultural backgrounds, with over 8 languages spoken within the organisation.
- The programme is accessible in a short space of time and offers unique progression routes for community researchers over time. Community researchers progress into leadership roles such as project management and, most recently, hosting of our own Cen-X podcasts.

APC Model

APC gives us unique, sustainable and dynamic access across the urban locale. We socially broker between organisations and communities to co-design, co-produce and co-evaluate.

Accessibility

We specialise in delving into the heart of 'hard to reach' communities across the distrust nexus that traditional institutions struggle to access.

Positionality

We act as a conduit between institutions and underserved communities across all urban locales through our informal networks that are constantly expanding.

Credibility

We hold a valued, relevant and healing voice within the urban locale that allows our work to have a desired impact. Empowerment of various types of community leaders give us a consistent audience, sense of ethics and direction.

Engage, Connect, Activate

The activation of underserved communities through the community research model and equitable research practices is central to the mobilisation and social activism aspect of research. Centric has developed an internal process for this model. This process is central to the success of the community research model, ensuring communities actively participate, co-design, and have a stake in the research process. [1]

The Project Team



Muhammed Rauf
Project Director



Raquel Caires Januario
Project Manager



Bukola Joel
Project Manager



Elaine Brown
Senior Community Researcher



Danna Quinones Rodriguez
Senior Community Researcher



Yazmin Vega Rodriguez
Community Researcher



Esther Agyeman
Community Researcher



Dion Tansey
Community Researcher



Ese Okuma
Community Researcher

Our Methodology

Centric partnered with Southwark Council to engage residents and VCS organisations to evaluate the Community Referrals Pathway. Our methodology is as follows.

1. The Centric team facilitated breakout session at Southwark's Cost of Living Summit with a mix of Southwark Council staff, residents and VCS organisations.
2. Centric developed posters to be sent out through the community research networks, Southwark Council's COL applications list and Community Southwark's mailing list
3. Following recruitment we asked participants to provide their availability via a form we sent out. This ensured we were able to schedule focus groups at times that were best suited to them. We scheduled additional focus groups to ensure could accommodate all those who wanted to participate.
4. Once we had received the responses, we engaged a total of 44 residents and 7 VCS organisations that we engaged in 5 focus groups.
5. Participants were then invited back to 2 co-design sessions to develop recomendations.
6. Upon completion of each engagement sessions the southwark community researchers conducted analysis that has formed the insights and recommendations for this report.

Drawing on the tradition of dialogism, the Self is conceptualised as being constituted by a multiplicity of dynamic, interacting voices. Despite the growth in literature and empirical research, there remains a paucity of established methodological tools for analysing the multivoiced Self using qualitative data. [4]

Our Co-design sessions with the community, we utilized a mixed method approach that included both qualitative and quantitative methods. By bringing together VCS organisations and residents, we were able to incorporate both exploratory and problem-solving elements in order to achieve the end goal of making recommendations. This approach provided us with more information and allowed for a collaborative and effective process, while also building trust between VCS organisations and residents with the help of a mediator who acted as our community researcher.

A mixed-method study is one in which the researcher incorporates both qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection and analysis in a single study. This type of a study enables a policy researcher to understand complex phenomena qualitatively as well as to explain the phenomena through numbers, charts, and basic statistical analysis. [5]

Timeline

Cost of living Event

Facilitation of breakout sessions at the Southwark Cost of the Living Summit

8th June 2023

Recruitment

Community Research Network List of COL Fund Applicants
Community Southwark's mailing list

1 June- 24th July 2023

Resident and VCS Focus Groups

Conducted a series of focus groups engaging 44 residents and 7 VCS organisations

28th June - 7th July 2023

Resident and VCS Co-Design

2 co-design sessions in July to develop recommendations based on themes from the focus groups

19th & 25th July 2023

Challenges & Successes

As in the case of all research projects and assignments, there were challenges and successes we have detailed below:

Our Challenges

- The short timeframe for the project to be delivered - 3 months.
- Changes in the format of COL event breakout sessions on the day impacted the team's ability to fully explore each theme.
- The timing of the research over the duration of the summer period created challenges, finding available times that suited all the research participants, intersecting with existing commitments, holidays and the school break.
- Finding a suitable venue in July to deliver the co-design sessions required outreach to multiple venues due to a lack of availability.

Our Successes

- The team were able to successfully recruit 44 residents and 7 VCS organisations within a short time frame, scheduling 5 focus groups to accommodate varied availability.
- Co-design sessions were well attended, and participants cited numerous recommendations to improve the experience of receiving the Cost of Living Community Referral Pathway in the relaunch this October 2023.
- The engagement of Spanish-speaking residents in the co-design sessions facilitated by our community researchers in their language allowed for their effective participation in the co-design session and represented the team's ability to adapt to the needs of residents. This success has been expanded upon on in the unintended outcomes section.
- Participants appreciated the opportunity to have a voice in how the pathway is delivered next year, expressing their creativity when designing solutions. They are keen to be informed about the implementation of the recommendations and look forward to the Fund's launch this October.

Centric

Southwark Council

COL Community Referral Pathway Evaluation

The Focus Groups



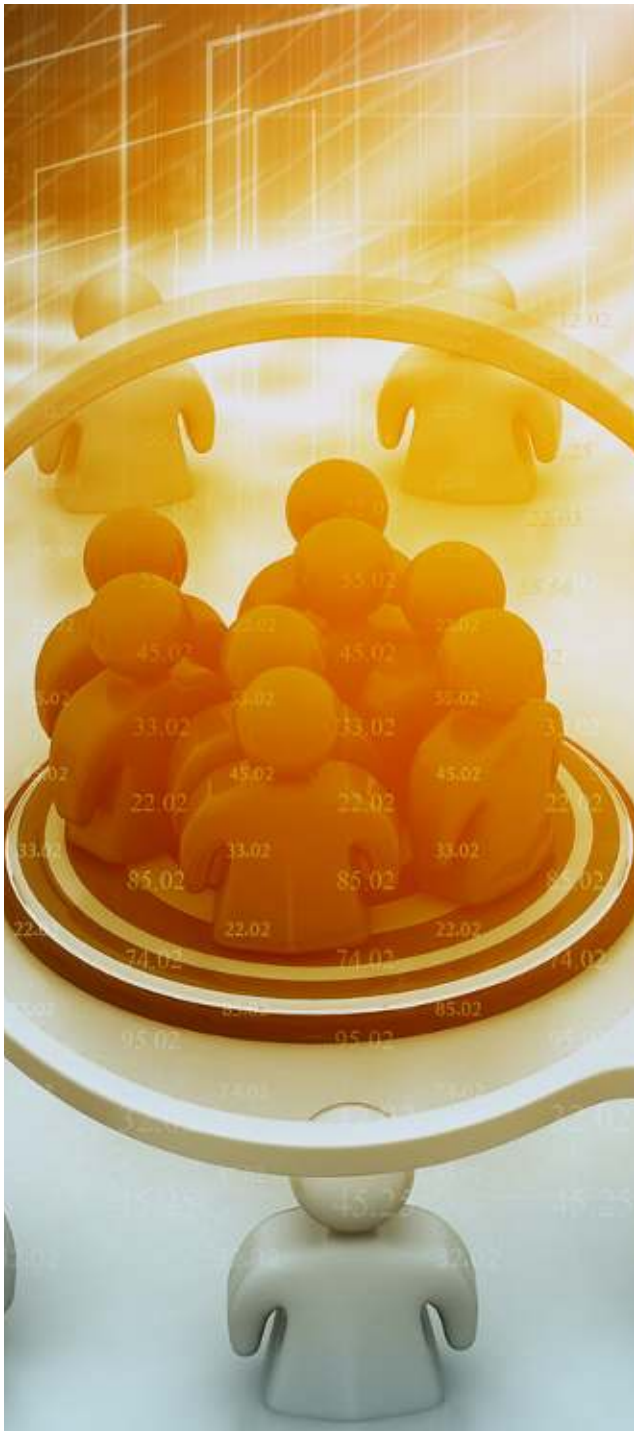
Introduction to Focus Groups

To understand the experience of residents and referral partners regarding COL Fund and Community Referral Pathway this year, we scheduled focus groups with residents and VCS organisation.

We had initially scheduled 3 focus group in total however 2 additional focus groups were scheduled to accommodate those who were unable to join the initial groups.

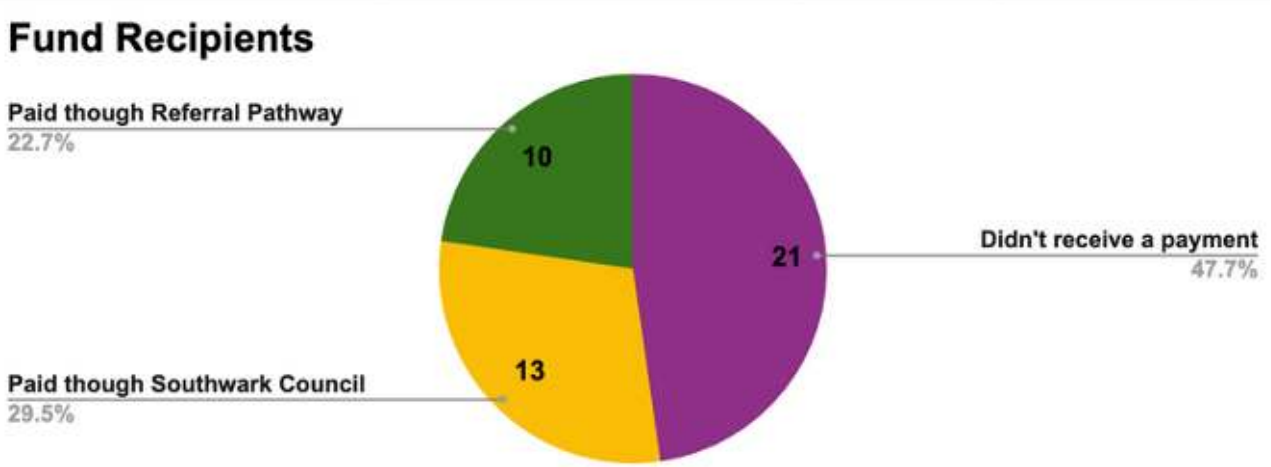
Our community research team consists of Southwark residents who led and facilitated each focus group. For the resident focus groups we utilised 2 breakout rooms that residents were assigned to based whether or not they had received a payment from the COL Fund.

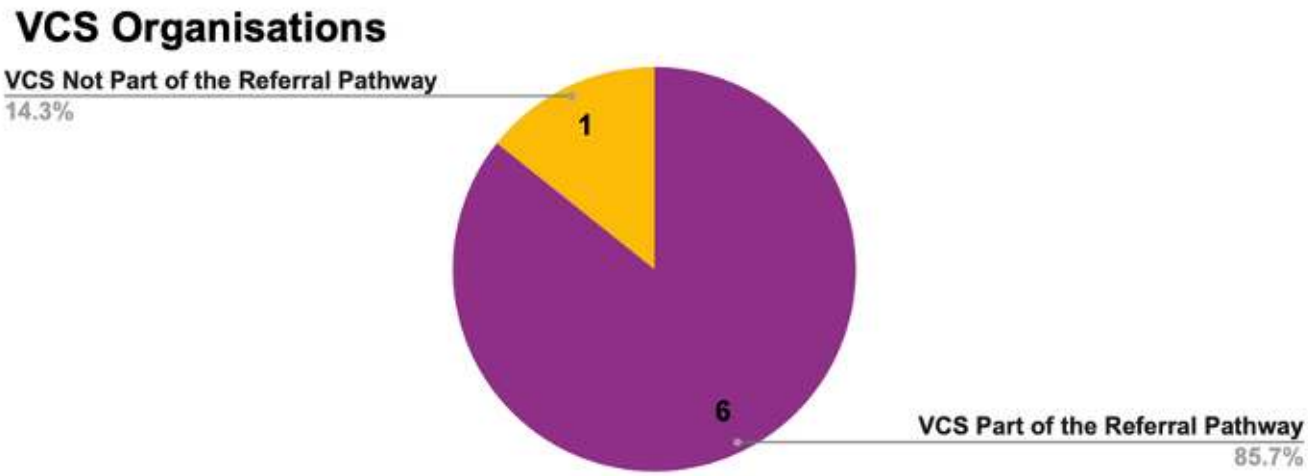
The focus groups were conducted online via Zoom at either 1-2:30 pm or 5-7 pm. These sessions were held throughout late June and early July. Upon completion of the focus groups, our team analysed the data to identify key themes for the upcoming co-design sessions.

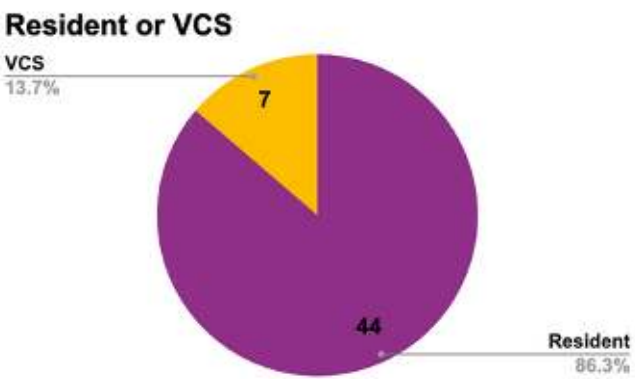


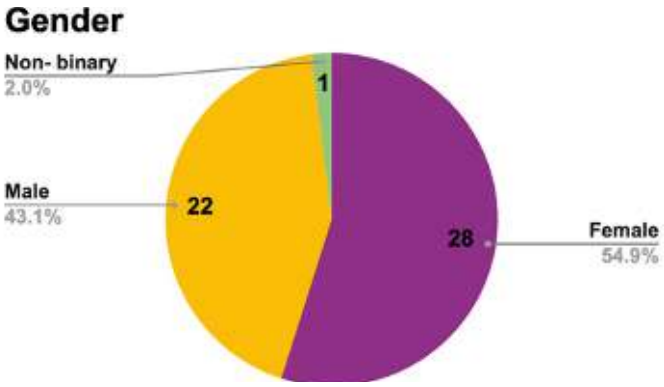
Participant Demographics

For this project, we recruited across different ethnicities with a focus on the inclusion of those from underserved communities. This included those who had received and not received support from the COL Fund.



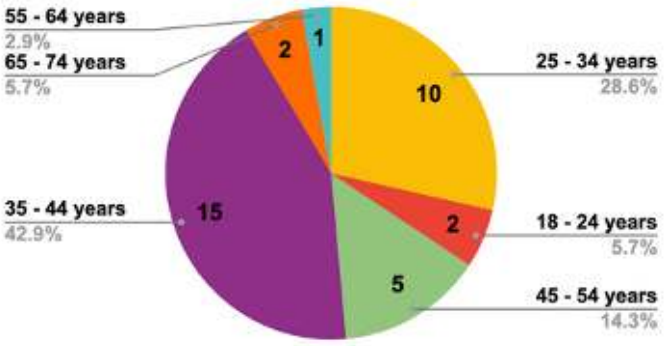




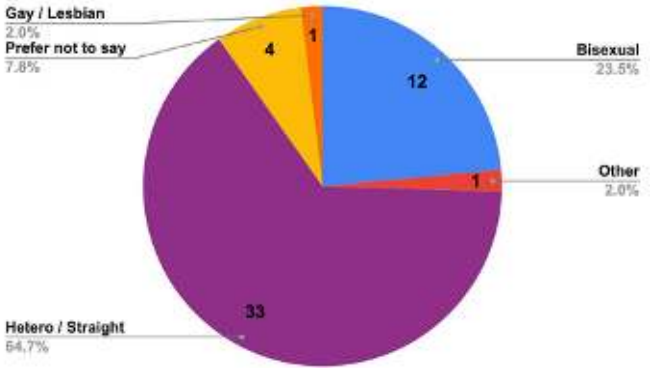


Demographics Cont.

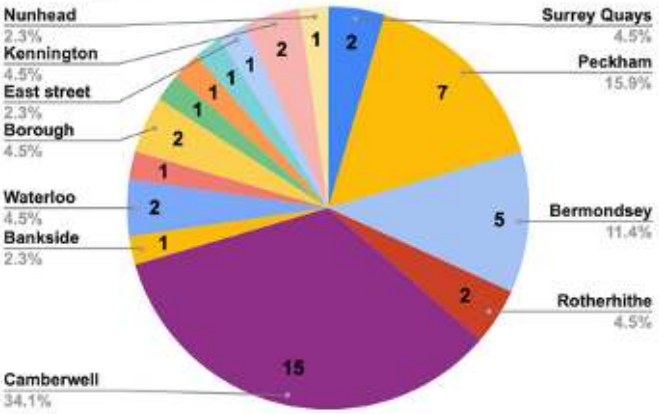
Age



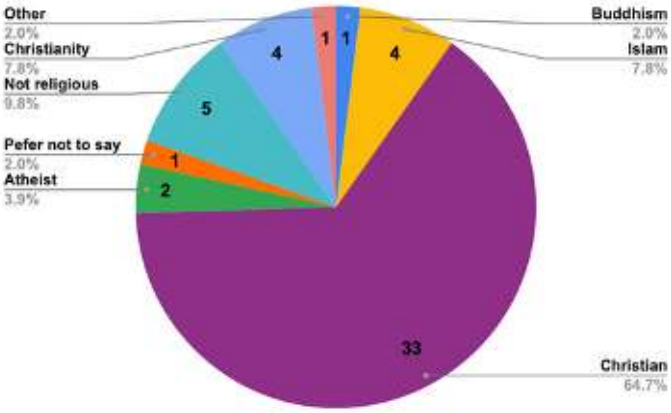
Sexuality



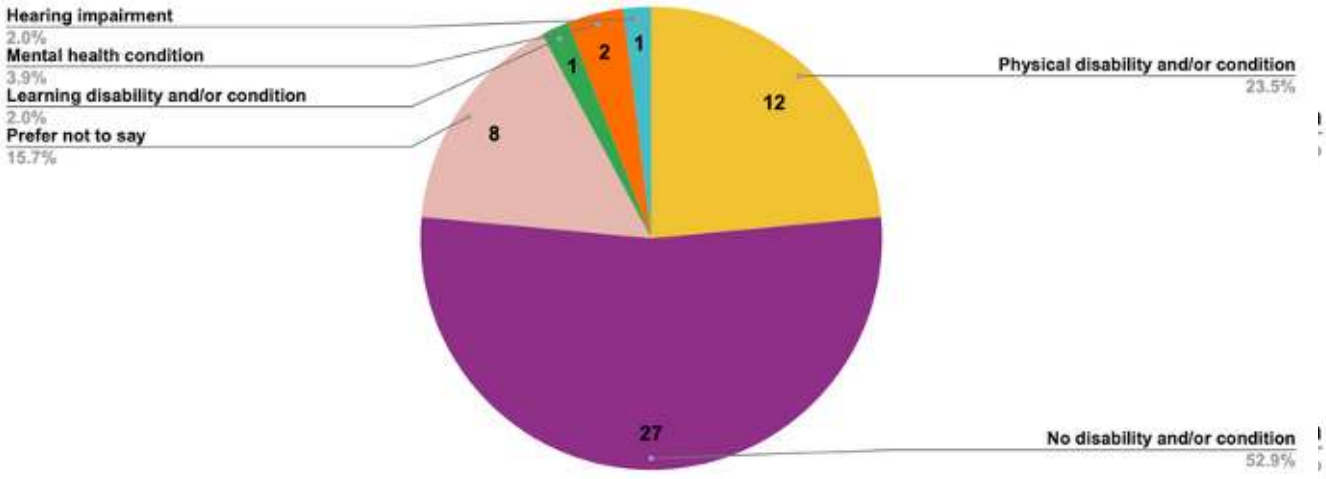
Borough of Residence



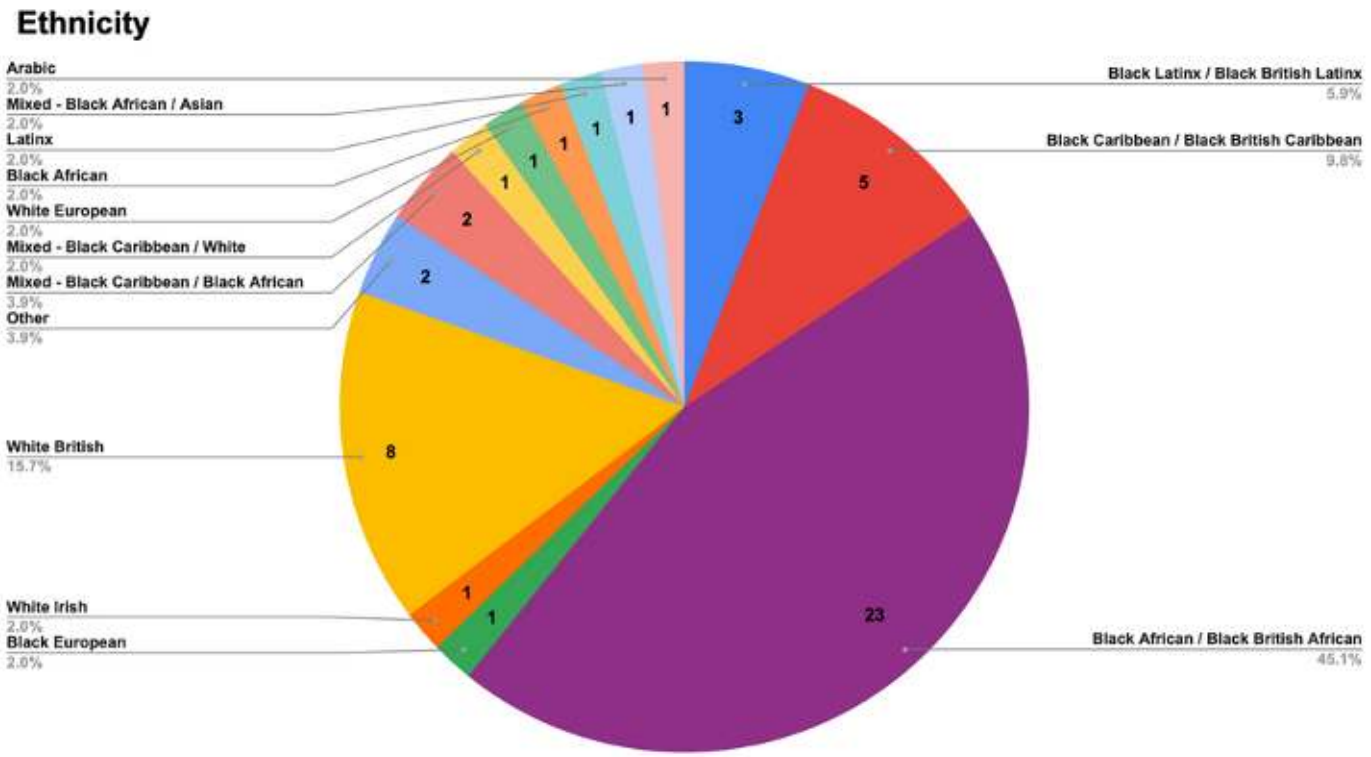
Religion



Disability



Demographics Cont.



Centric

Southwark Council

Cost of Living Community Referral Pathway

Focus Group Insights





Insight 1

Impact on Residents

Southwark Council

Impact on Residents

There was an overwhelmingly positive response for many who did receive payments.

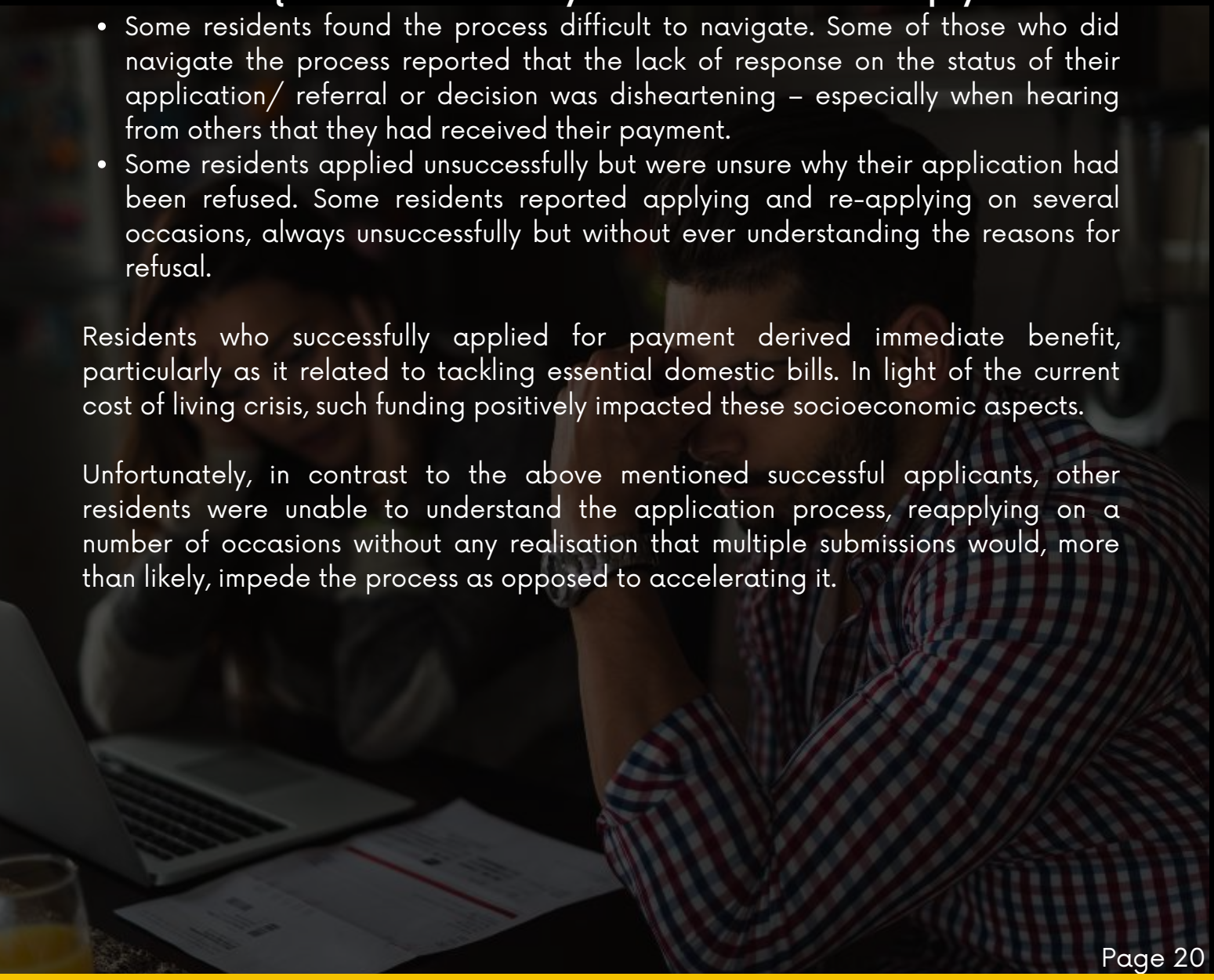
- Residents expressed their content in receiving support at a difficult time.
- For many the winter period was especially difficult and therefore the timing of the support was received positively.
- Residents utilised payments on an assortment of bills related to food, energy, tax and other monthly expenses.
- In addition to this referral partners who supported them were given praise in supporting them in their applications.
- The support was especially helpful for migrants and refugees. Referral partners cited a lack of support for these groups in general.

Concerns and questions were raised by those who didn't receive a payment.

- Some residents found the process difficult to navigate. Some of those who did navigate the process reported that the lack of response on the status of their application/ referral or decision was disheartening – especially when hearing from others that they had received their payment.
- Some residents applied unsuccessfully but were unsure why their application had been refused. Some residents reported applying and re-applying on several occasions, always unsuccessfully but without ever understanding the reasons for refusal.

Residents who successfully applied for payment derived immediate benefit, particularly as it related to tackling essential domestic bills. In light of the current cost of living crisis, such funding positively impacted these socioeconomic aspects.

Unfortunately, in contrast to the above mentioned successful applicants, other residents were unable to understand the application process, reapplying on a number of occasions without any realisation that multiple submissions would, more than likely, impede the process as opposed to accelerating it.



Participant Quotes

Grateful for the Support

"I was very grateful for it but yeah I can very much agree it could have been a bit more, especially looking at the people that have got children because it wasn't enough for my sister. She's got three kids, you know, been in shop and not cheap."

"I needed money at that time. I needed it for several things. It was very well arranged so that it wasn't difficult to access. It shows that the Council really cares about the people. And I appreciate it a lot."

"I believe having a hundred pounds now, will really go a long way to assist me, certainly my bills and also taking care of the needs as well."

"It came at a time I needed to pay some bills. I needed cash for some other things. So it gives it at the rightful time and it really has an impact because it helps you having (to deal with) additional expenditure that was out of your budget, you know. I never expected it to come at that particular time and it came."

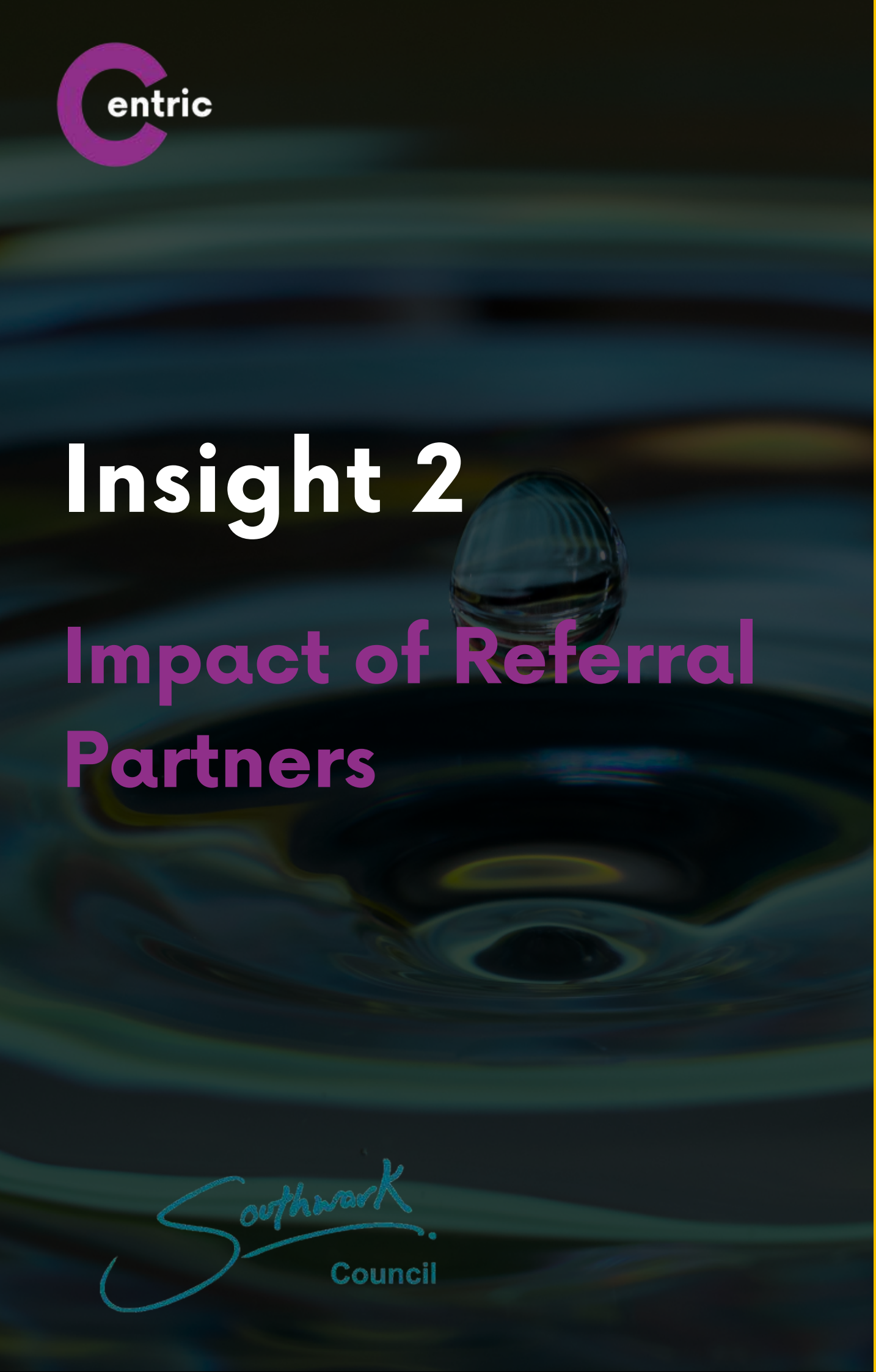
How they utilised the Fund

"I used it pay those council bills that day. So I think it was very helpful. It came in finally."

"I had to pay my council tax and also used part of it to pay my personal bills – one or two. So the Fund has actually been very, very helpful and came at the very right time for me."

"I used part of it to pay towards a bill and I used part of it for groceries. So it came in extremely handy. I'm a single parent as well, so it was really well received and good timing."

"I was not like in arrears through my council tax, so I just used it to pay the council tax. So technically I was in arrears but before I would get like the formal letter, so I just used it pay it off so that, that was what I used mine for."



Insight 2

Impact of Referral Partners

Southwark Council

Impact on Referral Partners

Some VCS organisations spoke to the praise they received from successful applicants, while conversely being overwhelmed by the process.

- Referral partners who made successful referrals reported receiving praise as residents returned to thank them for their support. Partners expressed content in being able to support residents through the process.
- Partners who were well known and trusted in the community received an influx of residents seeking support who appeared to have heard about the Fund from others who had already received support.
- Residents who had been referred but did not subsequently receive a payment or any response from the Council would come back to them, creating extra pressures that affected their capacity.
- It was reported that the sheer number of residents seeking support sometimes made it difficult to manage that demand in addition to their other normal or day-to-day activities. This would have had an impact on the organisation to deliver services to their communities and may have been a contributing factor to some referral partners reducing the volume of referrals. Furthermore, there is financial trauma that exists in the urban local. Many of those who form the teams of the VCS organisations who are existing or potential referral partners have grown up within an environment of financial precarity. [7]
- Therefore asking these organisations who may be facing financial precarity to take on additional responsibilities for which there are no allocated resources may impact their ability to partake.
- It was reported that some of the VCS organisations lacked the appropriate resources and sometimes found the experience of acting as a partner challenging.

Catherine A. Roster hypothesized that workers whose jobs require them to deal with a heavy volume of work at a rapid pace would be more likely to experience job strain (i.e. emotional exhaustion) which, in turn, depletes their energy and makes workers more likely to delay decisions as a result. [8] Subsequently, managing difficult conversations that impact the financial support received by residents is an undertaking for which referral partners may not be prepared.

Participant Quotes

Positive Responses

"So many people got that money, and the fact it was cash and went back into the community was amazing. Absolutely amazing for that."

"So the impact on me about the, the referral was seeing people coming back to say at least for this window, this one-month window or two-month window, I got help, and it's the satisfaction for me."

"My thoughts are they needed the support. I told them about the support, and they came forward, and I gave it to them. So it was, it was something, something of joy that I was able to help when the opportunity came. And so generally, my thoughts were I was happy that they had the support."

Lack of Capacity

"We had nearly 4,000 people that came through, and that was a lot of people turning up. Some messages had gone around naming one of our staff members. [She received so many emails] we had to put an automatic reply on her email address telling people contacting her what to do. We opened our building at certain times [in the morning] but it would take three members of staff plus volunteers to look after them all. [People would queue up early] When arriving at the office, we realised the number of people we would have to see."

"We were really sort of overwhelmed by it, at the peak, in February and had to bring in staff to work extra hours. We had to boost the amount of volunteering. So it started with a targeted approach for people we were already supporting and then snowballed."


Centric
Insight 3
Application Process
Southwark
Council

Application Process

For some, the application experience was straightforward, while others described a less positive experience – chasing their application through multiple avenues.

- Many participants who received payments were happy with the application process via their referral partner, which was straightforward and did not ask invasive questions such as financial information.
- Some residents did not receive any acknowledgement of their referral or any notification of the outcome. In some cases, this may have been due to an incorrect email address being included in the referral. On returning to the partner to find out what had happened to their referral, some were informed that the partner could not assist.
- Some residents were unaware of the direct application route or of the existence of other referral partners and reported arriving very early at the offices of one well-known partner to queue to be seen and referred. That partner reported that demand from residents put a strain on its capacity.
- Residents from some communities reported a lack of awareness of the Fund or how to access it. Evidence gathered at focus groups and workshops suggested the residents from Southwark's Latin American communities appeared most affected. Residents pointed to a lack of communication and the absence of information about the Fund in other languages (Spanish) as a possible cause.

The process within which residents proceed to access the Fund directly impacts those who choose to move ahead with such processes or, in turn, decline. Regarding the application form available on the Council website, which had questions relating to the applicant's financial circumstances, it could be argued this could have turned away eligible applicants from underserved communities due to their pre-existing financial trauma, therefore exacerbating discomfort in completing the application due to the requirement to include their income, even though it was not means tested. There may be a concern for these communities as to whether such information would be shared with third parties, such as debtors or other Council departments. Despite this, there is acknowledgement there is a balance to strike between ensuring access to the Fund with the right checks and procedures and avoiding abuse of process.[7]

Alternatively, the simple application form via referral pathway benefited the effectiveness of the community referral pathway. However, arguably delays or lack of communication on problematic/rejected applications can exacerbate the financial and mental strain on residents, and in turn, this may be reflected in the experiences of the referral partners with whom they were working.

Participant Quotes

"So filled out a quick form there and put my details on, and then they forwarded it to Southwark Council. They said I had to wait for a short period. I'll get an email with whether I was entitled or not or something like that. And then, yeah, the email came through from Southwark and went to the post office to collect it."

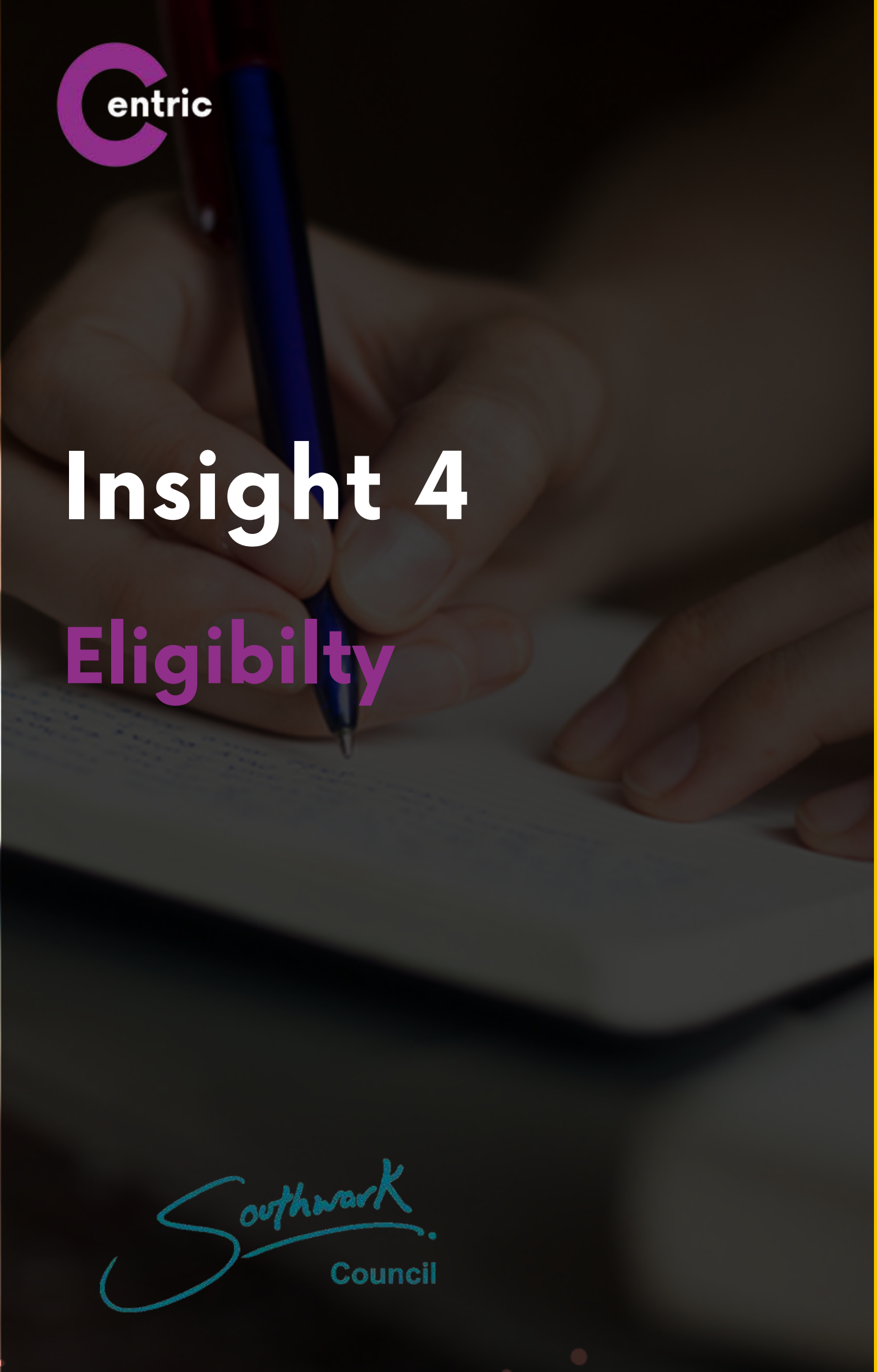
"I did mine directly with the council, so I just filled the form. They sent me the email. I think two emails, then I went to the post office to pick it up."

"I got an email from someone from that department, and I, at the time, maybe the payment hadn't come through to me yet, so I kind of applied again, and then I was told that, oh no, the payments on it's way to you."

"After I applied, it took two months."

"Yeah, you had to wake up early. You had to go there early, knowing full well they wouldn't be open, but be prepared to stand in the queue for at least two hours. Only to be in there once you get in, only to be in there for 60 seconds."

"Another thing that didn't work well is that the opening time of (referral partner) was ridiculous, and the closing time was actually quite ridiculous. It felt like I was going to an embassy for a visa."



Insight 4

Eligibilty

Southwark Council

Eligibility

Overall, there was some confusion around the criteria for those who were eligible to receive payments.

- There were multiple forms of Cost of Living support from the Council and other sources, including the UK Government, during the period. Feedback from residents suggests this may have caused confusion among residents about eligibility for the Council's Cost of Living Fund last autumn and winter. Some residents believed they had already received a Cost of Living payment and did not realise they could apply or be referred to other Cost of Living support from the Council.
- Some residents reported that they were uncertain about eligibility criteria or whether applications/referrals would be means-tested. Others reported that partners gave mixed messages about who was eligible. Some self-employed residents believed (wrongly) that they would not be eligible.
- For some residents, the definition of a household was problematic. The number of payments from the Fund per household was limited. Some residents who shared their home with others were told they were not eligible because someone else at that address had already been paid. Residents found this unfair – saying that sometimes multiple generations lived in the same home but as separate households.
- Some residents reported that system checks by the Council to establish who was living at an address sometimes produced incorrect results, leading to unfair refusal of support.
- Some residents reported returning to referral partners in an attempt to resolve issues of apparent ineligibility.

The apparent lack of understanding and clarity surrounding essential aspects of applying for the Fund could be mitigated by the availability of clearer guidelines alongside the provision of a temporary hotline and/or webpage designated to facilitate the application process.

Participant Quotes

Residents

"I think what I still don't understand is the criteria, but I have, I guess that probably you're not in a position to clarify that."

"I'd say maybe to just be more clearer on what it's, what it was. You know, the Fund, it's amazing. But what was it was for, cause I'm, I'm still confused if this was the help of cost of living or if this was to help with electricity. So I'm not sure It wasn't too clear."

"I would say that it was mixed because on one level people were saying, oh you are not entitled if you know, I, I work part-time currently. Oh, if you're working you can't get it. But then it was like depending on the level of your income, I dunno whether it was the level of income or whatever. And then some people say, no, anyone can get it. It's not means tested, it doesn't matter if you're working or not. So there was a real mix of information in terms of eligibility and who was available, who, who was eligible. From what I understand and from my experience."

VCS

"We really, I guess the people that were denied the funding that it wasn't, you've already gotten it, it was not clear to us sort of some people it was like their details didn't match the others the council had on the system, but they did and so we just had to like re-refer and then it went through. So I think there were some like glitchy things but there's always going to be glitchy things."

"We had people who were denied the Fund because their name and address and date of birth flagged, and so we had people that like that who got kicked back to us."

"We asked people if they had already applied and people would, you know, say no they hadn't. And then we had about 18% of the people that came through us had already had it or were not able to qualify for it."


Centric
Insight 5
Awareness of the Fund
Southwark
Council

Awareness of the Fund

About half of the residents who had received a payment were generally happy with the experience (see Insights 1 & 3). Residents who had not received support described their lack of awareness of the Fund or how to access it.

- Some residents reported that they did not see advertisements or communications about the Fund that may have led them to understand that they could apply.
- Other residents reported that they did not become aware of the Fund until after it had closed, with some reporting that they first became aware of the Fund when contacted by the Centric team.
- Some residents reported that they became aware of the Fund thanks to one of the referral partners. For some, this became a pathway to support. However, others said they were wary of the legitimacy of the partner due to a lack of information about the pathway or any publicly available official recognition of the partner's status as a partner.
- Evidence from focus groups and workshops indicated that some partners were effective at disseminating information about the Fund. However, some residents questioned why there was not more official information from the Council about the pathway. Others could not understand why the application process to the Council was so different to the process when referred by a partner.

The dissemination of knowledge regarding the Fund and how to apply was identified as a key theme creating a barrier for underserved communities to receive support. The manner in which knowledge is disseminated includes the format and language (this can refer to the terminology used or language other than English). This is a key factor in the empowerment of underserved communities, including their access to provisions that provide them support. Knowledge is indeed power, and when looking to motivate and engage underserved communities or tackle the cynicism and mistrust that may exist between them and the local authority or other institutions (we saw some evidence of that mistrust among focus group attendees). [6] It is vitally important to understand how best to disseminate knowledge in a manner that is conducive to those communities. Centric has begun an exploration into different methods of disseminating knowledge to underserved communities via a project currently underway with Impact on Urban Health. It was also previously cited in Centric and Social Finance's project, alongside Southwark's Public Health team (Rebuilding Trust Project - report available upon request), that the effective dissemination of knowledge regarding Council initiatives, support and the opportunity for open dialogue on issues pertinent to them is important to establishing stronger relationships with these communities. This subsequently leads to increased participation and engagement with Council initiatives.

Participant Quotes

"I wasn't aware. Awareness was really poor. It not like it was a secret, but it wasn't sort of broadcast well at all."

"What I would like to say is if no one tells you about it, then you wouldn't know. Which I think is not fair. If Southwark are giving it to residents that live in Southwark, they should make it public for everyone to know. But if someone didn't tell you, you will not know. Cause it's a colleague that told me other than that, I wouldn't have known that this is what is going on to help families."

"I think they could have done a little bit more to advertise it to to more people because if my friend had not told me about it, I wasn't aware that was something that would be available to me as well."

"(Regarding) the information being sent out, the people who have access to this information is quite low."

"I would say the timing was good for me definitely. But also like had I missed it, because apparently, it had been going on for a few months before I was aware of it. So had I missed it, then the timing wouldn't have been good. But yeah, in, in essence, it was good. But people had said they got their payment from December, and I think I got mine maybe in February time."

"I only found out about Southwark Fund via the Centric email!"

"I don't understand. Put it out there because it's money. You are gonna have people applying, you know, lining up, trying to get it. They've not put it out there enough."

"I felt a lot of people lost out, that could have benefited from it."

Centric

Insight 6

Support & Communication

Southwark Council

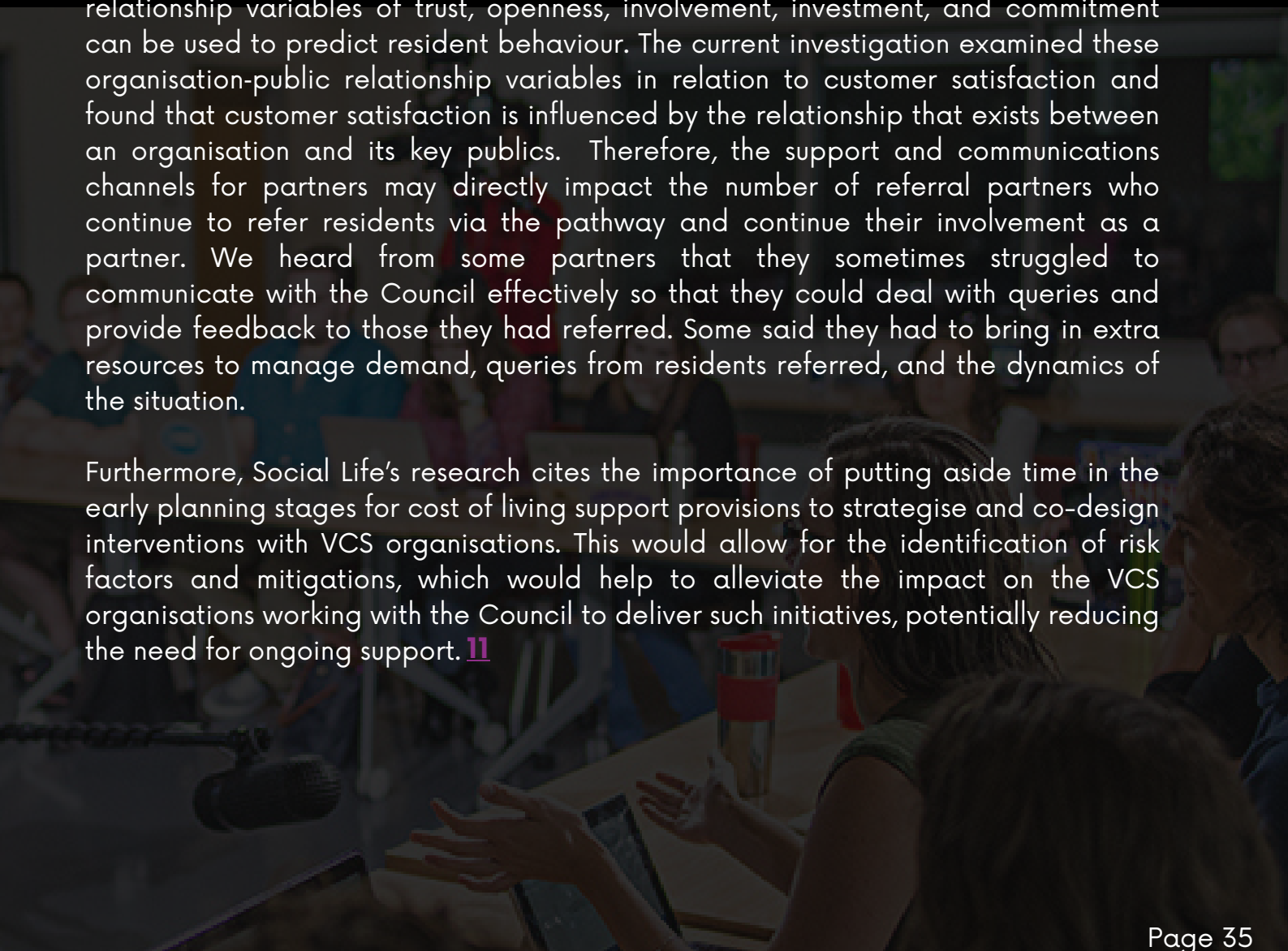
Support & Communication

Referral partners felt a lack of support regarding their efforts to refer residents.

- Some partners reported that they found it necessary to contact the Councils repeatedly to address issues being brought to their attention by a minority of those they referred.
- Aside from receiving access to a portal to support referrals/applications, some partners felt they were not offered additional support by the Council that would have helped enable them to deal with the unexpectedly large number of residents they were engaging.
- Partners said they became a bridge of communication between residents and the Council. Some partners believed that residents found it easier to approach them with concerns and queries rather than contact the Council directly.

The importance of communication and support has been associated with overall satisfaction. Ledingham and Bruning (1998)[9] reported that the organisation-public relationship variables of trust, openness, involvement, investment, and commitment can be used to predict resident behaviour. The current investigation examined these organisation-public relationship variables in relation to customer satisfaction and found that customer satisfaction is influenced by the relationship that exists between an organisation and its key publics. Therefore, the support and communications channels for partners may directly impact the number of referral partners who continue to refer residents via the pathway and continue their involvement as a partner. We heard from some partners that they sometimes struggled to communicate with the Council effectively so that they could deal with queries and provide feedback to those they had referred. Some said they had to bring in extra resources to manage demand, queries from residents referred, and the dynamics of the situation.

Furthermore, Social Life's research cites the importance of putting aside time in the early planning stages for cost of living support provisions to strategise and co-design interventions with VCS organisations. This would allow for the identification of risk factors and mitigations, which would help to alleviate the impact on the VCS organisations working with the Council to deliver such initiatives, potentially reducing the need for ongoing support. [11]



Participant Quotes

Communication with Referral Partners

"I think the communication's been slightly weak between us and the council in general. You know, we're having to always contact the council for information that should really be provided, as you know, as we work sort of collectively."

"So how I feel about it, it's quite confusing, frustrating. And there just needs to be a better system set up because it looks as if Southwark itself are not getting the backlash. It's more the smaller organisation."

"All they (Council) did was to register me and give me a portal which I could log into to recruit the referral of the people, upload their names on every detail that they wanted. And that's all."

Lack of Support for Referral Partners

"I had no support whatsoever. Everything I used was my laptop was mine, time was mine, everything was mine. There was nothing that I got from Southwark Council. The only people who benefited were the people who I was referring. And for me, I was quite happy that I did refer those people because I know they needed it. Or I also would've said I would've also been happy if Southwark council could have recognised that I was using my time and sort of remuneration was considered for myself."



Insight 7

Community Communication

Southwark Council

Community Communication

WhatsApp is a potentially effective tool for raising awareness of the Fund and pathway – with the right controls in place.

- Many participants mentioned the prevalence of marketing messages via Whatsapp that was sent out by an unnamed referral partner and/or residents regarding the COL Fund which helped to spread awareness.
- Some residents and partners said that this more informal approach to communications, based on a form of social media that was very widely used in the community, seemed effective though concerns were also raised that it could be abused – for example using the guise of the Cost of Living Fund to request personal information from people for malign purposes.
- By working with partners from the outset of a new Fund/ pathway, effective guidance could be developed that would inform partners' communications with their clients and residents who might seek support from the Fund – including via WhatsApp or other social media channels.
- Residents talked about how social media is displacing other more traditional communication channels used by the Council and partners among large sections of the community. Some partners also talked about this and the potential effectiveness of WhatsApp as a communication tool. This has previously been noted through Centric's work, especially for the delivery of Fashion and Air pollution project to engage with youth. It became clear that Whatsapp as a tool of communication is effective at reaching a wider audience.

Social media has largely replaced other more conventional avenues of communication, and this was highlighted by residents. A fluid and easily accessible communicative medium, WhatsApp is considered by many organisations and their target audiences as an effective tool. However, as intimated by some residents, there are concerns surrounding the security of personal information disclosed via this avenue. Encrypted messages fall short of mitigating the risk of data sharing between organisations once it has been disclosed by the resident/client. Non Disclosure Agreements (NDAs) and/or confidentiality clauses may afford a degree of protection, however, whether these could be extended within a context compatible to Whatsapp remains to be seen.

Participant Quotes

Whatsapp Messages and Data Sharing

"The message was bouncing back, and it was quite hard because people weren't sure who he was or where it was coming from. Was there data protection? Where was it stored? So, the majority of the time, I couldn't sort of proceed with the actual referral. People did come because of word of mouth – they were all coming to me."

"There was a WhatsApp message going around telling people to come to one of our members of staff. Not just the organisations but a member of staff. The number of emails that she was getting was just ridiculous."

"We didn't send any WhatsApp messages out, but there was a WhatsApp message and text messages that other people were sending around. And it went from community group to community group. From a marketing point of view, it was amazing, absolutely amazing and from being on the receiving end, it was interesting."

"Someone sent out a lot of text messages to people, and that text message got shared with their details. It was a total GDPR breach in what they were asking people to provide, and people were coming into us showing it to us as well."

Conclusion

Overall, the development and delivery of the community referral pathway was successful in improving accessibility of the Fund to residents across the London Borough of Southwark.

Successful applicants praised the referral partners and appreciated the consideration and support of the Council during such a challenging period. It could be argued that such initiatives are conducive to improving relations between the Council and residents, perceiving the initiative as a proactive response to macroeconomic changes impacting their lives.

Referral partners felt the positive impact of successful applications. Due to the nature of the Fund's purpose to deliver financial support, it was a purpose-driven initiative for the referral partners to support fellow residents in a time of financial precarity. This empowered referral partners to provide direct support to residents rather than refer them to another service, positively impacting their reputation and standing within the community.

Conversely, it has been expressed that more could be done to advertise the Fund in Southwark, especially within underserved communities and those who do not speak English as a first language. Furthermore, residents would have benefited from clearer communication and guidance surrounding the Fund's purpose, eligibility and the process of applying to lessen the strain on the Council and referral partners who dealt with high volumes of applications, having to manage ongoing communications with applicants that were unsuccessful of experiencing delays in their payouts. This, in turn, meant referral partners required further support from the Council to manage the demand, having utilised their own resources to facilitate the referral of resident applications.

Centric has developed a series of recommendations to improve the efficacy of delivery of the Cost of Living Community Referral Pathway that we suggest the Council consider prior to the relaunch of the Fund in October 2023.

COL Community Referral Pathway Evaluation

Co-Design Sessions



Introduction to Co-Design

The objective of the co-design sessions was to develop recommendations with residents and VCS organisations based on the themes identified the focus groups. We focused on 3 key areas;

- Application Process
- Eligibility/Criteria for Funding
- Awareness and Communication

Co-design sessions were delivered in person at the Queensborough Community Centre on the 19th and 25th of July. The Community Research team was split between three tables and facilitated each group - mixing with residents and VCS organisations. A short presentation kicked off each session providing the following;

- An overview of Centric and the COL community referral pathway
- Project objectives and focus group insights
- Session and activity plan for the day
- Dinner, drinks and music upon the sessions completion.

Each session was attended by **Eugene Nixon** and **Jorge Castano** from Southwark Council. The final session was also attended by **Deputy Mayor Councillor Naima Ali**, who gave the closing speech.



Speech from
Deputy Mayor Councillor Naima Ali.
Click Play to activate the video

Unintended Outcomes

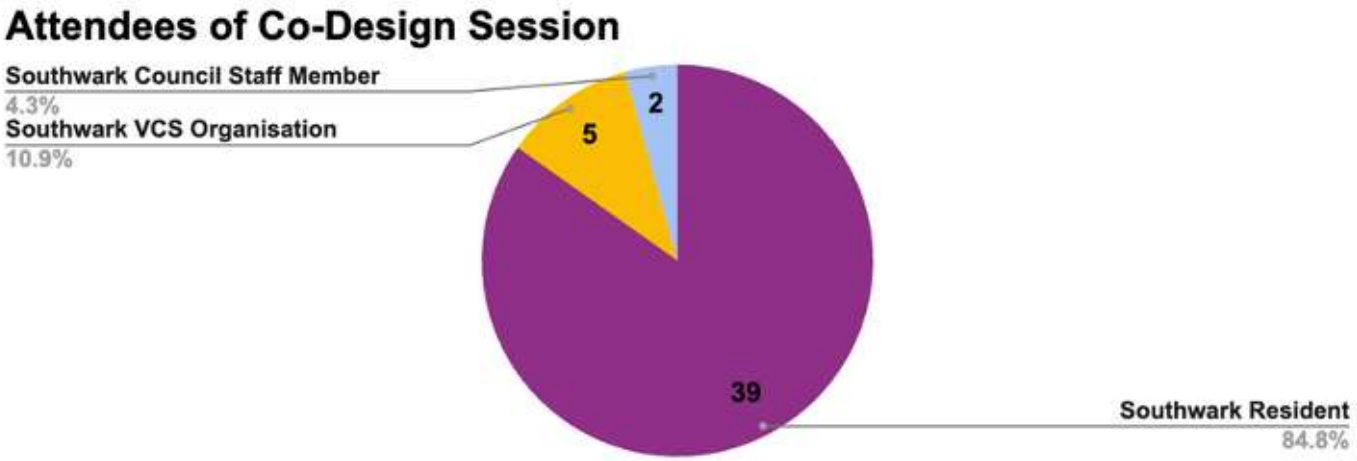
In the co-design session, we found that many participants were referred directly by other participants and from those who live locally to the community centre. The Eventbrite was shared across their own informal networks - showing an eagerness to participate, although not all of them filled out the appropriate forms.

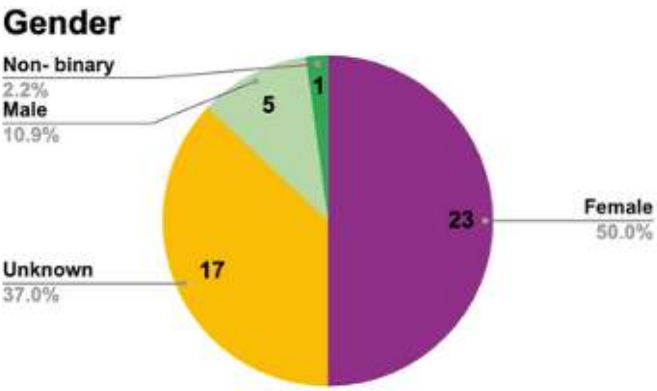
A group of participants who joined from the Latin Community were Spanish speakers. Due to our diverse team, which included Spanish and Portuguese speakers, we were not only able to engage with them but effectively facilitate their participation in the workshop, where their opinions and experience were translated live by the team and included in the recommendations below. Many of those from this group cited a need for more awareness of support regarding the cost of living and the Fund itself. It became clear that language was a primary barrier for these participants to engage with support offered by the Council. The Centric community researchers who facilitated this group also form the basis for **Centriko** - our Afro-Latin arm based in Elephant and Castle. The ability of the team to adapt to the needs of the community, connect with them and ensure their voices were heard was key to the success of the co-design session for this group.

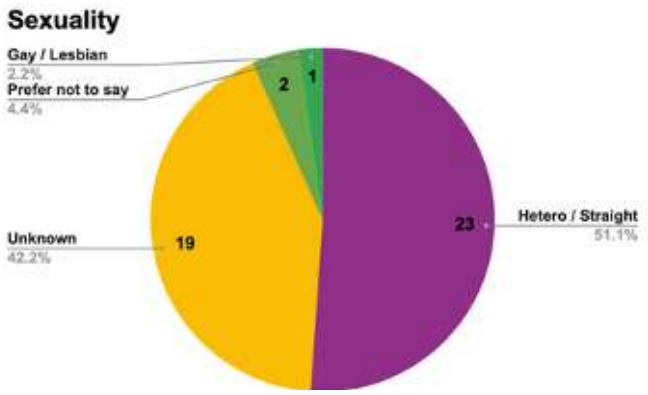


Participant Demographics

We invited all the previous participants from the focus groups to the co-design sessions, which they shared across their own networks. Although the timing was difficult for some due to the start of the summer holidays, many prior participants attended and invited others to join them. This was in addition to Centric's attendance and recruitment at the Southwark Faith Leader's Conference. Although not all participant demographics have been captured - from observations, we can stipulate there was a large cohort of participants from Black African and Caribbean communities, as well as Latin Communities, as mentioned in the successes section.

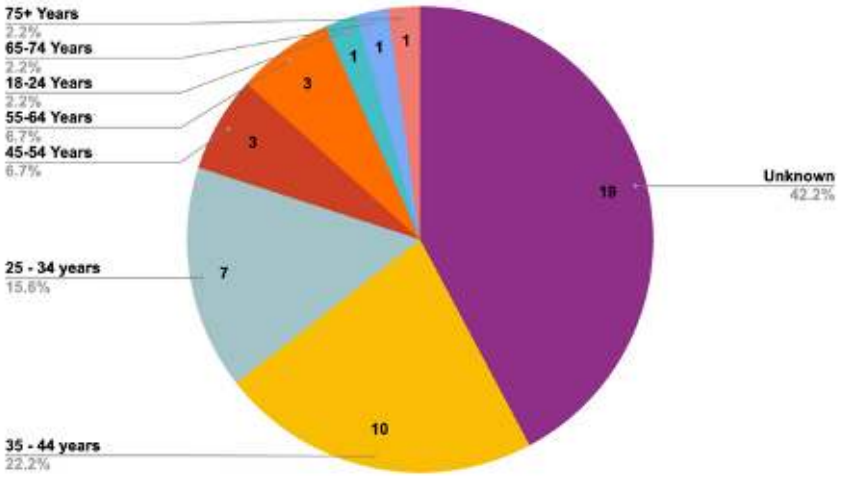




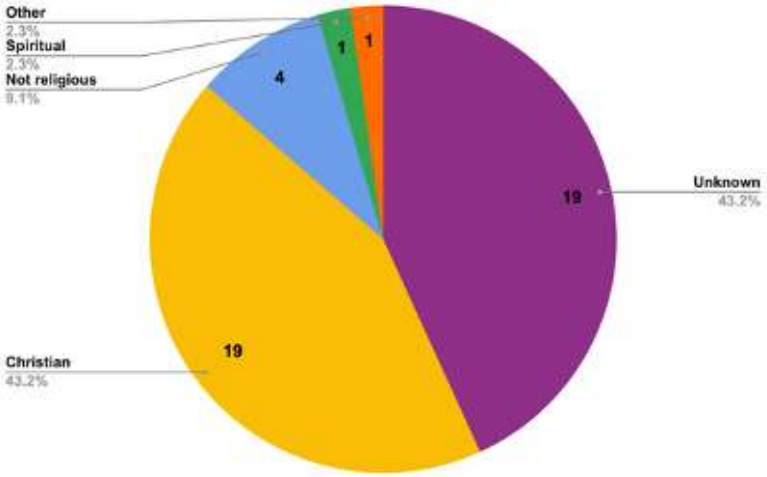


Demographics Cont.

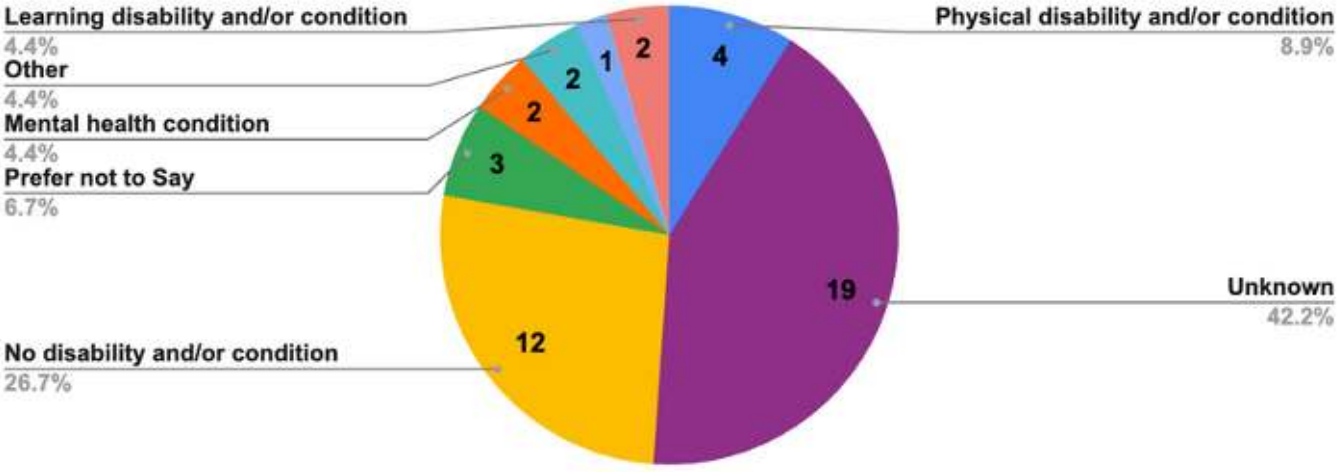
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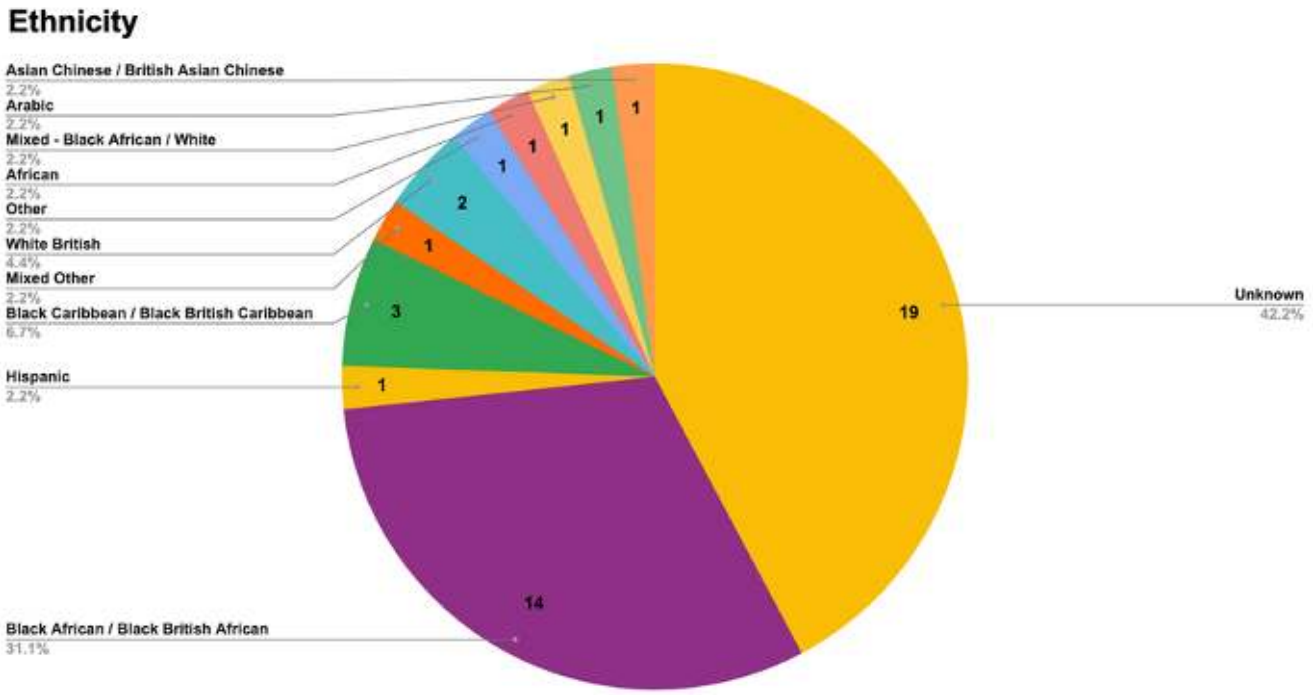
Religion



Disability



Demographics Cont.



Centric

Southwark Council

COL Community Referral Pathway Evaluation

Recommendations



Recommendations (Residents)

1. Coordinated Communications Approach

We recommend a coordinated approach across all communications channels with clear messaging on all of the following:

- The purpose of the Southwark Cost of Living Fund and how it differs from other forms of cost of living support
- The period for which the Fund is open for referrals and applications (opening date and closing date)
- The Community Referral Pathway – its purpose, the partners and how, where and when partners may be contacted
- The eligibility criteria for the Fund – so that residents understand whether they should seek support
- Status updates for residents after they apply for support or are referred for support from the Fund
- Notification of the outcome of the referral or application – if it was successful or not, and if not, why not

Response

Additional public information will be available about the fund and how it may be accessed via multiple channels. That information will include clearer and more consistent messaging about the eligibility criteria and the period for which this winter's fund will be open to direct applications and VCS referrals.

We will work closely with our VCS referral partners with the aim of further publicising their role as partners and the ways in which residents can contact them.

All those who apply or are referred to the fund will receive notification of the outcome. Where an application or referral is refused, the notification will include an explanation of why it was refused and how the recipient may challenge that refusal if they think it was based on incorrect information.

Recommendations Cont. (Residents)

2. Raising Awareness and Advertising

We recommend the Council considers the following avenues as cited by participants in the refreshed communications strategy for this year's Cost of Living Fund to raise awareness:

- Banners and/ or posters in places that are commonly frequented by members of those communities – such as schools or GP surgeries
- Other advertising in grocery or other retail outlets more commonly used by members of those communities
- Increased use of alternative methods of communication – videos or illustrations – potentially distributed via social media channels
- Make greater use of data already held by the Council – for example, the electoral roll - to target communications toward those in underserved communities using direct mail or SMS
- Integration of QR codes in comms where possible

Response

We will support the creation of a wide range of new communication products, available via a range of channels to further raise awareness of the fund this winter. The Council will make full legal use of data to target communications about the fund toward those in deprived or potentially underserved communities.

3. Accessibility for Non-English Speakers

We recommend advertising the Fund and referral pathway in multiple languages would increase awareness and applications from communities who speak English as a second language or not at all; this was highlighted by the Latin community in our co-design session. This would apply equally to the online application form. Consideration should be given to how the form may be made available in several languages commonly spoken by residents and for whom English is not their first language – such as Spanish, Portuguese, Somali, Bengali, and Hindi.

Response

Communication material for the fund will be published in English and other languages widely spoken by residents of the borough – most notably Spanish We will consider the feasibility of publishing the online application form (Resident Application Route) in languages other than English.

Recommendations Cont. (Residents)

4. Eligibility for Support

We recommend that all Council communication about this year's fund should clearly specify who is eligible, as well as explain how and when eligible residents can gain access to support from the fund. Further, we recommend that after settling on a set of eligibility criteria, the Council should try to avoid changing those criteria during the period when the pathway is open. Residents and partners described their uncertainty about who was or was not eligible for support from the Cost of Living Fund and spoke about the wider negative consequences of that uncertainty. Inconsistent messaging undermines confidence and can create barriers even if well-intentioned. This would be resolved by the implementation of this recommendation.

Response

We will set clear and simple eligibility criteria for this winter's fund in light of findings from this report and wider consultation. Once set, those criteria will not change during the period of the fund, but referral partners will continue to have wide discretion on which households meeting those criteria they may refer. Public information about the fund will more clearly differentiate the Cost-of-Living Fund from other forms of support.

5. Centre for Support

We recommend the Council work with partners to establish pop-up centres to deal with queries from those residents who were referred but struggle with technology or have other queries they prefer to deal with face to face. Participants suggested pop-up events occur about once per month at locations around the borough. We recommend that the Council and partners consider this suggestion and how it may be implemented.

Response

We will work with partners to explore the feasibility of setting up one or more of the proposed "pop-up centres" to support the delivery of this winter's fund. While we expect that implementation of recommendation 1 will significantly reduce the need for such provision, we are working with partners who wish to expand or formalise their face-to-face provision as partners. For example, this could include the sharing of facilities by partners.

Recommendations Cont. (Residents)

6. Vulnerable Groups

We recommend the following groups be considered to receive support as identified by the participants in the co-design sessions:

- Those receiving an income below £25,000
- Large families who have more than two children
- Pensioners
- Those with disabilities

Response

The eligibility criteria for this winter's fund ensures that all the groups listed in the recommendation will have access to the fund this winter. We will make changes to the referral process so that additional information about those referred may be captured – including whether there are any dependent children in the household or if the household includes one or more people with a disability.

7. Place-Based Approach to Engagement

We recommend that the Council take steps to engage underserved communities in the places where they reside and congregate – doing so via faith or other community leaders where possible. This would facilitate a place-based approach to engaging communities. Southwark's Latin American community is prevalent in the Elephant and Castle locale. Centric is able to engage with residents to enact this recommendation. For example, the use of our space at the Trunk in Elephant Park which also serves as a Community Research Hub for Afro-Latin arm, Centriko that has established links with the Dominican Republic and Afro-Latin community in Southwark, including community researchers from these communities already working on Southwark based projects.

Response

We are working with community and faith group leaders to further engage more partners and extend the reach of the fund this winter to all parts of the borough and all our communities – and especially our Latin American communities and Muslim faith groups.

Recommendations Cont. (Residents)

8. Intelligence-led Approach

We recommend the Council adopt a human intelligence-led approach to engaging communities, providing platforms for the voices of residents and referral partners regularly while the fund is delivered. This may include identifying community leaders who can provide insight and broker the relationships between their respective communities. This type of approach will help to build connection, credibility and trust and give the Council the opportunity to demonstrate how they have responded to feedback given previously. This also provides practical advantages enabling rapid response to emerging trends, issues or concerns. The Council should recognise that this may require time and persistence. The importance of developing platforms for joint partnership work (see recommendation 11) with residents or VCS organisations was also cited by Social Life's research as a key factor in improving the efficacy of service provisions. [11]

Response

We will seek to identify community and faith leaders well placed to act as intermediaries or brokers between the Council and communities and potential referral partners. We recognise the advantages of doing so as set out in the report recommendations and value the support of the Council's Communities team, Community Southwark, Southwark Food Action Alliance, Southwark Faith Conference, Southwark Muslim Forum, and others as we seek to give them effect.

9. Public Acknowledgement & Endorsement of Partners

We recommend the Council to create and disseminate a range of communications identifying community referral partners and validating their role as partners. The Council and partners should work together to publicise the role of partners, including information about how residents can informally discuss their situation with a partner before they are referred. It would be beneficial for more partners from all parts of the borough to work with the Council as referral partners - especially community groups with roots or reach in the Latin American community and any other communities that may have been underserved by the fund last year. Parent and Communities Together (PACT) was identified as one such organisation.

Response

We are pleased that Parents and Communities Together (PACT) an organisation identified in the report as one with a strong presence and reach in the borough's Latin American communities has become a partner for this winter's fund. We thank them for doing so and look forward to working with them. We will work with PACT and other partners with the aim of further publicising their role as partners and the ways in which residents can contact them. We will only ever do this with the consent of partners.

10. Starter Pack for Referral Partners

We recommend the Council, in addition to the information it already provides, create a Starter Pack to be given to all new partners when onboarding. That pack could include:

- FAQs
- A clear description of partner roles and responsibilities
- Additional information about how the application process works
- Eligibility criteria for the Fund
- Key contact information
- Communications products about the Fund they can share via their networks

The Council should consider this suggestion and how it may be implemented ahead of the opening of the pathway for this autumn.

Response

All referral partners will be provided with a starter pack at the point they become partners. Packs will include all the content identified in the recommendation.

Recommendations Cont. (VCS)

11. Cost of Living Partner Feedback Forum

We recommend the Council develop a Partner Feedback Forum formed where VCS organisations acting as referral partners can come together to network and provide feedback to the Council. When doing so, learning may be drawn from the contemporary medi-scape where stakeholders and patient groups give feedback to care providers about the current provisions to co-design new services and initiatives has become much more prevalent. Centric is already managing a patient advisory group for Lambeth Together regarding their Chronic Pain Workstream.

Such an approach could be employed in the relaunch of the Fund this October to facilitate greater engagement with referral partners and may include:

- Co-design of amendments to the Fund and disseminate information on behalf of the Council via their own networks and comms
- Providing feedback, insights and suggestions on Fund and pathway delivery
- Provide a space for ongoing engagement between the Council and partners

Response

We will implement the recommendation by commissioning an independent third party with good knowledge of the borough and its VCS – especially those organisations that work closely with Black, Asian, and other minority ethnic communities – to create and oversee a Referral Partner Feedback Forum this winter. The forum will comprise a WhatsApp group for all partners (and the Council) where information and feedback may be shared and that may help to foster greater collaboration among the referral partners. It will also include an in-person component where partners can come together and network – with a first event planned to take place before Christmas.

Recommendations Cont. (VCS)

12. Wider Support for Partners

We recommend other forms of support the Council might provide mentioned by participants that include:

- Loaning or donating equipment to be used to make referrals, such as laptops or iPads
- Financial recognition or compensation – especially for partners dealing with a very large number of referrals
- Regular check-ins – a virtual or physical space where all referral partners can come together to share experiences and learn from the Council or others
- Direct helpline – a means by which partners can contact the Council quickly and efficiently when they have a query

Social Life's research also found that flexibility in the form of support and funding VCS organisations improve their ability to respond to the needs of the communities. Such provisions has the potential to improve the efficacy of the pathway and other provisions delivered in partnership with VCS organisations. [11]

Response

We will provide all referral partners with a direct help-line number or email address and may provide the most active partners with a named contact. We will provide updates and information for partners via the Partner Engagement Forum (see response to Recommendation 11).

We will consider how we might provide all the forms of additional support set out in the recommendation. For example, we will decide whether financial recognition or compensation for partners making referrals would be appropriate when this winter's referral pathway closes in March 2024. We see the pathway as primarily a means by which organisations may do more for those they already work with. However, we also accept the principle that it is right that our partners, many of whom face their own resource pressures during the cost-of-living crisis, should receive reasonable compensation for the additional costs they may incur by acting as partners and making referrals.

We have already provided support for partners to apply for Big Lottery Cost of Living Grants this winter with twenty organisations attending training on how to apply for that funding and maximise their prospects of success.

Recommendations Cont. (VCS)

13. Application Updates

We recommend that referral partners are privy to the same access to the status of a referral they have made as the Council and those referred to ensure that referral updates are provided more quickly and frequently by the Council.

Response

We will increase the frequency with which partners are notified of the outcome of referrals they make compared with last winter – doubling it from every two weeks to every week.

14. Engaging Faith Groups

We recommend further outreach to faith communities and organisations, specifically citing those attended by underserved communties. For example, in the Muslim community, particular mosques are frequented by specific communities, such as the Baitul Rahman Islamic Cultural Centre, which hosts the Somali community. Reaching out to each faith group to build the relationships to onboard them as referral partners and requesting their active promotion of council initiatives would be effective in engaging underserved communities. This can be done by working with community leaders, such as Imams and Pastors, who can engage communities on behalf of the Council.

The ability to connect with these communities is critical to their effective collaboration and involvement in the endorsement of Council initiatives. The ability to connect is based upon a shared sense of empathy and use of language when engaging in developing a shared sense of understanding upon which a foundation of trust can be built, which community leaders inherited instil due to their existing position within these communties.

Response

We fully accept the premise of the recommendation and aim to significantly increase the number of groups of all faiths and denominations that act as referral partners for the Cost-of-Living Fund this winter.

We are working hard to reach out to all our faith communities by for example directly engaging imams and pastors. We extend a huge thanks to our colleagues in the Council's Communities team and to the Southwark Muslim Forum for their support with this effort.

Recommendations Cont. (VCS)

15. Mapping and Engagement of Off-stage Organisations (Medium/Long-Term)

We recommend that the Council look ahead beyond the immediate Cost of Living crisis to map what we term "off-stage" organisations and initiatives that are serving communities but outside the current mainstream. Such organisations may not be known to the Council or others who work with the borough's VCS.

Although this may include faith groups, as cited in the recommendations above, there are other groups that are well entrenched within specific communities and are funded privately by members. We recommend that the Council funds further research for to conduct a mapping of these organisations, engaging in outreach in the community to identify, engage and map these organisations for future initiatives.

Response

This is a longer-term aim, but the Council will apply learning from the implementation of recommendations 7, 8 and 14 when considering what further steps may be taken to identify and engage "off-stage" or grassroots organisations that are entrenched within their own communities as it plans for any future iterations of the Cost-of-Living Fund or similar initiatives.

Recommendations for Referral Partners

16. Coordinated Communications Approach

We recommend referral partners coordinate their communications (recommendation 1) via their website and social media to align with communications being sent out by the Council. This will inform residents of their role in the community referral pathway and reassure those who may question the legitimacy of the pathway and the partner's role.

17. Preparation for Launch

We recommend that potential or existing referral partners should attend Council meetings and events related to the community referral pathway to better understand the objectives, how it will operate and their role. Engaging with open dialogue and with the Council prior to the launch of the pathway will allow them to highlight any risks and agree on mitigations with the Council so they can be adequately prepared prior to launch.

Additionally, we recommend staff who are working with residents are briefed to ensure there is consistency in communications regarding;

- The Fund's purpose
- The role of referral partners
- The application process
- Eligibility

18. Signposting

We recommend partners signpost COL support available to residents in their premises to create more awareness of other forms of support available to them either by Southwark Council or UK Government.

19. VCS Organisations Representing Underserved Communities

To ensure underserved communities across Southwark are aware of the Fund, we recommend that more organisations who are representative of underserved communities join the pathway, signposting support, disseminating communications via their networks, and actively referring their service users to apply to the Fund.

COL Community Referral Pathway Evaluation

End Notes

COL Community Referral Pathway Evaluation

The Cost of Living Thank You and Evaluation Event



Introduction to COL Event

The Cost of Living Summit provided an opportunity to bring Southwark Council staff, referral partners and residents together to thank them for their involvement in the delivery of COL support initiatives, garner feedback on the process and identify improvements that can be made in future.

Our team facilitated 3 breakout sessions at the Cost of Living Summit based in Walworth Methodist Church, focusing on 3 key areas;



The room was split into 2 tables, which were divided into 4 groups, each assigned to answer a specific question written on an A3 sheet for a set period. The sheets were then circulated to the group to their right. By the end of each breakout room, each group on the table could discuss each question and provide their thoughts in the form of post-it notes.

We have provided the insights on the first two breakout rooms below, with the insights from the Community Referral Pathway included in the broader evaluation conducted by the Centric team with residents and VCS organisations due to the alignment of insights garnered.

Communication & Awareness

Overall it seems the communications strategy taken by Southwark Council and VCS organisations, supporting initiatives, obtained limited success. Participants cited the following avenues for improved communications regarding COL support initiatives, Warm Spaces, and Roadshows;

- Communications in multiple languages to ensure the right communities are engaged, those who do not speak English as a first language may struggle to engage and understand that there is support available to them. This was especially true for those in the NRPF group, for whom the applicable cost of living support was greatly beneficial.

- Participants cited updated changes in the support available and eligibility to receive support being communicated via email to be ineffective and were not reflected on the website. Conversely, better use of the existing communications channels via Community Southwark, referral partners and VCS organisations relaying such communications would have been more effective.

- Better coordination with Community Southwark to effectively communicate provisions and support would have been beneficial as it was cited in some instances Community Southwark was unaware of the Warm Spaces available.

- Many participants cited the need for signposting in the communications being sent out. A resident may see comms regarding one form of support without being informed of the other types of support available. Presenting all of this information in one place (for example, one page on the Southwark website) and referring back to it in new communications (e.g. see here for more information on support available) would effectively ensure there is greater awareness of different types of support being offered. Furthermore, signposting in the Warm Spaces across the borough was cited numerous times, highlighting Warm Spaces as an ample opportunity to communicate the provisions of support available.

- More direct marketing cited in specific locations such as libraries, youth centres, accommodations refugees reside in, supermarkets, and community notice boards.

- For residents and VCS organisations alike, having a direct contact at the council to speak to regarding queries was cited as an important recommendation.

Warm Spaces

The Warm Spaces provided comfort for many of the residents who used the space. Time and Talents and Age UK were cited as two of the most successful in regard to attendees of their spaces, and it was specifically cited that the Time and Talents location was particularly accessible for residents. As they were also a referral partner, this had the added benefit of signposting to the Cost of Living Fund via the referral pathway and facilitated the referral of many residents to receive payments. It seems that Warm Spaces provided an ample opportunity to engage with residents who were vulnerable and required additional support; however, due to the lack of signposting across Warm Spaces, an opportunity was missed to advertise the support available to them. Social Life's research showed that Warm spaces worked best when there was a range of activities and services on offer.[11] Furthermore, participants cited the following areas to improve the utilisation and service provision of Warm Spaces;

- Liaising with the VCS organisations well in advance of launch would be beneficial to ensure they are well-equipped and prepared. It was mentioned that involving Community Southwark from the inception of the concept would support the co-production of the concept to ensure its efficacy in delivery for the organisations and residents.

- For those facilitating the Warm Spaces, it seems there was a lack of capacity regarding staff, and the training or recruitment of staff was required to serve the residents attending the space effectively. This was exemplified in examples where it was sometimes difficult to manage the group dynamics that developed in these spaces.

- The facilitation of transport service by Age UK was well received and could be expanded upon.

- Advertising and comms regarding Warm Spaces should be sent out well in advance to ensure they are well attended.

- Further provisions for hot food - the concept of community kitchens was raised to benefit certain groups of residents (e.g., refugees who do not have these facilities where they reside). In addition to provision to take away hot food.

- VCS organisations welcomed using volunteers and would appreciate more volunteers to provide support.

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Thank You For Your Attention!