

I am writing in my capacity as an elected member of the City of London Corporation and of its Community and Children's Services Committee (the "Committee") about the response to the Covid 19 crisis by the Department of Community and Children's Services (the "Department").

### **Deadline for responses**

The Department is seeking views from elected members and residents' and volunteers' representatives on its response to the Covid crisis pursuant to a motion that I put at the meeting of the Committee on 28 September. The motion was unanimously passed. I volunteered to draft the request for responses, and within 20 hours after the end of that meeting had provided a draft letter to the Chair of the Committee and to the Department. The letter was sent out the following day.

I had suggested that the deadline for responses be the end of Sunday 25 October, allowing a few days for them to be published in the agenda pack for distribution around Friday 30 October for the Committee meeting on Friday 6 November. The Department, however, wanted the deadline to be Friday 16 October. This deadline would give the Department more time to collate the responses than the members and representatives would have to write them. The respondents would be writing their submissions in their spare time, unlike the Department's staff, who would be collating the responses as part of their paid employment. The Department indicated that the responses would need to be subject to a GDPR check, but this check should not take long, as the respondents would be advised in the letter not to identify individuals, and it was reasonable to expect them to comply. The Department refused to set the deadline any later than the morning of Monday 19 October. This deadline still gives the Department as much time to carry out a couple of minor administrative tasks (collation and GDPR check) as it has given the respondents time to write their submissions.

I am making this point in my submission because I think it does of itself illustrate a major problem in the response of the Department to the Covid crisis. The Department, and the Corporation generally, seem to operate according to rigid and unduly long timescales, which accommodate the convenience of officers more than those whom they should be serving, in this case the residents.

### **COLPAI construction works**

I give my views on the Department's handling of this issue in this blog that I posted on the Golden Lane Estate website: <http://www.goldenlaneestate.org/profiles/blogs/city-corporation-continues-to-fail-residents> .

### **General approach of the Department**

On 20 May, an open letter was sent to the Department on behalf of a number of residents on Golden Lane Estate expressing deep concerns about the COLPAI construction works continuing during lockdown. The Department sent a substantive reply on 14 July - eight weeks later. Although the Department apologised for the delay and explained this was due to "a lot of research that needed to be done and information was required from several different teams", this delay was not acceptable. Internal procedure is never a valid excuse for a service organisation to give to a customer. The organisation should ensure its internal procedures work in such a way that the customer receives a satisfactory response within a reasonable timescale.

Not being given within a reasonable timescale was not the only problem with the Department's reply. The other problem was its content. In an email from the residents on 27

July, the Department's reply was described as not "a response, it's an essay in evasion and self-justification".

Here are a few excerpts from the residents' email concerning particular aspects of the reply:

"The comments made about mental health support would be offensive if they weren't absurd: the point the response carefully misses is that it is the City itself which has caused great distress to a number of vulnerable Golden Lane residents by persisting with noisy construction work only a few metres away during lockdown and done nothing to support them.... How is the Southbank Centre's "*fantastic and free initiative bringing free poetry and visual art activities*" relevant to residents effectively trapped during lockdown in their flats shaking with vibrations from the building site?....

After weeks of delay, you use words like "exploring", "considering" and "reviewing" several times each. How much "exploring", "considering" and "reviewing" does it take to do things like meeting your commitment to clean residents' dust covered windows?....

Covid 19 has created challenges for all of us, however there is no excuse for abandoning community meetings. You say, '*We are considering the possibility of setting -up digital platforms to host virtual meetings*' but we fail to understand why you are only now considering this as a possibility. The City has been holding virtual internal and public meetings on Zoom and Teams for over 3 months surely it could have arranged at least one for resident stakeholders over the 5 months that have now been missed.

Will the project team or City ever acknowledge that it might have got something wrong? Or will it carry on with the pretence that everything it does is right, and - when anyone queries this - send defensive and evasive responses like this one?

When will the possibilities referenced in your letter become actual actions?"

On 14 August the Department sent an email to the residents, saying:

"We are satisfied that [its reply] does address the key points raised by you and other residents in your Open Letter....

The City Corporation has not abandoned community meetings. COVID-19 has completely changed the way staff at the City Corporation have worked and the way services have been delivered over the last four to five months. The level of confusion and uncertainty created by COVID-19 made it extremely difficult for us to continue with the community meetings in any meaningful format and, it is only very recently, that the City Corporation has deemed it appropriate for Officers to look to set up online meetings where it is beneficial and practical to do so...."

Even a cursory review of the correspondence (which is reproduced in its entirety in the comments on this blog: <http://www.goldenlaneestate.org/profiles/blogs/mental-health-awareness-week-open-letter-to-colpai-project>) reveals that the Department's claim that its reply "does address the key issues raised....in your Open Letter" is unfounded.

The statement about "the level of confusion and uncertainty created by COVID-19" is a separate cause for concern. Any large organisation, and particularly one like the Corporation which has responsibility for vulnerable people, should have in place a contingency plan in the event of a major disruption to service. A pandemic is an entirely foreseeable contingency. A proper contingency plan should have resulted in no "confusion and uncertainty".

I have described this correspondence not only to illustrate the Department's inadequate response to the issue of the COLPAI construction works, but also to illustrate fundamental issues with the Department's general approach, including:

- a lack of contingency planning
- delay

- a lack of creative problem solving, and
- evasion and self-justification when questioned.

### **Recognition of volunteers**

In the meeting of the Committee on 28 September, the issue was raised of the Corporation recognising the work done by resident volunteers during the crisis. Members suggested that the Corporation could send a letter to each volunteer thanking them for what they have done, and perhaps produce pin badges for those who want them to recognise their involvement.

I understand that the Square Mile Food Bank has been asked for a list of its volunteers, presumably for this purpose. But the GLE Covid 19 Hub has not. It is obviously important that all volunteers are recognised. Details of the others are easily obtainable from the relevant persons.

At the Committee meeting, the Chair of Policy, who sits on the Committee, made an alternative proposal that the volunteers be recognised in some kind of "Hidden Heroes" event at the Guildhall. I strongly oppose this. The Corporation is adept at staging events which praise others, so that reflected glory falls upon itself. It is especially not acceptable that the Corporation makes PR capital out of its failure to respond to provide adequate support to its own residents in the Covid crisis, which is why the volunteers had to do so much in the first place.

**Councillor Graeme Harrower**

**18 October 2020**