

Housing Scrutiny Committee - 16 April 2015

Minutes of the meeting of the Housing Scrutiny Committee held in Committee Room 1, Town Hall, Upper Street, N1 2UD on 16 April 2015 at 7.30 pm.

Present: Councillors: O'Sullivan (Chair), Kay (Vice-Chair), Diner, Fletcher, O'Halloran, Williamson, MacDonald and Tenants

Co-opted members: Jim Rooke and Rose Marie Macdonald

Also Present: Councillors: Doolan

Councillor Michael O'Sullivan in the Chair

69 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Item 1)

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Aysegul Erdogan. Councillor Fletcher also submitted apologies for lateness.

70 DECLARATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (Item 2)

None.

71 DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS (Item 3)

None.

72 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING (Item 4)

It was advised that Councillor Doolan had submitted written questions further to the Estate Services Management item considered at the previous meeting. Officers were to issue a written response to the Committee when all of the requested information was available.

Councillor Doolan suggested that, in addition to the job descriptions for Estate Services Coordinators and Quality Assurance Officers which had already been circulated to the Committee, members may also wish to consider the job descriptions of Estate Services Managers, Support Managers and Support Assistants.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 5 March 2015 be confirmed as a correct record and the Chair be authorised to sign them;
- (b) That the job descriptions referred to above in relation to Estate Services Managers, Support Managers and Support Assistants be circulated to members of the Committee.

73 CHAIR'S REPORT (Item 5)

The Chair thanked members of the Committee and the public for their contribution to the committee's business in 2014/15. It was noted that the scrutiny reviews of estate services management and work platforms were coming to an end and this meeting was to be the last to receive oral evidence. It was commented that the scrutiny of RSLs had been productive and the Chair wished for this important work to continue into 2015/16.

The Chair advised that he would be attending forthcoming caretaker meetings and other members of the Committee were welcome to accompany him.

74 **ORDER OF BUSINESS (Item 6)**

The Chair stated that the order of business would be as per the agenda.

75 **PUBLIC QUESTIONS (Item 7)**

The Chair outlined the procedure for public questions and the filming and recording of meetings.

76 **ESTATE SERVICES MANAGEMENT: WITNESS EVIDENCE (Item 8)**

Barry Emmerson, Grounds Maintenance Service Manager, made a presentation to the Committee, copy interleaved, during which the following main points were made –

- The Greenspace team was responsible for delivering all grounds maintenance services on behalf of the Council. This included maintaining parks and housing estates, monitoring performance, maintaining a map and database of the Borough's horticultural assets and supporting biodiversity.
- The service was previously delivered externally however was transferred in-house in January 2013. This had enabled the Council to have greater oversight of the service. It was explained that all staff now had the Council's standard terms and conditions of employment and were paid the London Living Wage.
- Examples were provided of the grounds maintenance services carried out. It was explained that the service was delivered geographically, with the borough split into three areas along ward boundaries and a dedicated team serving each. This enabled staff to become familiar with their particular area.
- The service was keen to build relationships with residents who wished to take ownership for the grounds maintenance of their own estate.
- It was explained that the service's performance management system was available to both housing and grounds maintenance staff and could be made available to the public. Example monitoring information was provided which indicated that 90% of all tasks in 2014 met standards, a 1% increase on the previous year.
- Examples were provided of grounds maintenance improvement works carried out on estates.
- It was reported that three local residents had been employed as horticultural apprentices and one of those had since been employed as a full time member of staff. The employment of apprentices was praised and it was suggested that further apprenticeships could be offered.
- A member queried the grass cutting schedules of estates, commenting that local housing offices could not provide residents with a date for when grass will be cut. It was explained that grass cutting was not a frequency based service and instead a window of two to three weeks was allocated for cutting grass. For this reason it was not possible to give an exact date for each estate.
- In response to a query, it was advised that members who wished to report repeated grounds maintenance faults were welcome to contact the service manager.
- The service was due to implement a new ICT system which would allow the monitoring of grounds maintenance work in real time.
- It was reported that there were no problems associated with transferring the service in-house. It was suggested that retaining the same staff had avoided performance problems which can arise at the end of such contracts. Staff had attended training courses on customer service and equalities and it was emphasised to staff that they were now representatives of the Council.
- A member queried the level of resident engagement in garden schemes, and in particular why some estates did not have such schemes. It was explained that that garden schemes were usually driven by a small number of dedicated individuals and not all estates had expressed an interest in such schemes. It was commented that

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although some schemes were very successful and the Council had transferred gardening responsibilities to residents in some instances, in others there was a mixed reception to gardening schemes from residents and in such cases a balance needed to be struck.

- The Council was investigating schemes such as “Incredibly Edible” which involve residents planting herbs and edible plants in local greenspaces.
- The Council encouraged residents’ associations to form gardening clubs. It was advised that residents living in areas without residents’ associations were welcome to contact their area housing office to discuss establishing such schemes. It was suggested that this could be made clearer on the Council’s website.
- In response to a question, it was advised that the service could seek to maximise income by taking on grounds maintenance responsibility for housing associations, tenant management organisations and private properties. It was indicated that the greenspace team already had the required knowledge, resources and experience to carry out this work, and that the service already provided such services to other local authorities. Income maximisation was considered particularly important given the financial pressures facing the Council.
- It was queried how staff were managed given the seasonal nature of grounds maintenance work. It was explained that due to climate change, seasons were not as defined as before, however the service did still require 25% more staff in the summer months. The Council sought to retain staff wherever possible to save time and expense on annual hiring and training, however some staff were released in the winter annually. The Council did attempt to find these staff other roles internally.
- It was reported that another local authority used an annualised hours system, which was considered more flexible. Staff were not permitted to take leave in the summer months, but were retained throughout the winter working much fewer hours. It was advised that the Council was investigating this employment model.
- A resident queried the weeding of pathways. It was explained that the grounds maintenance service applied weedkiller approximately three times a year and it was the responsibility of caretakers to pull out any weeds.

John Mootealoo, Cleaner Streets Programme Manager, made a presentation to the Committee on mechanised services, copy interleaved, during which the following main points were made –

- The management of mechanised services transferred from Housing to Environmental Services in April 2013. At this time the staff level was reduced whilst the service specification remained the same.
- The Committee noted the mechanised services provided and performance of the service.
- The team collected 150 tonnes of lumber each month and had a 24 hour response time on weekdays. It was advised that some weekend collections were carried out following bank holidays.
- In response to a question, it was advised that lumber was sorted into different bays at the depot which allowed some to be recycled. The Committee requested further information on the proportion of lumber recycled. The Council was also considering if any lumber could be donated to re-use schemes.
- It was suggested that the road sweeping service had significantly improved since the purchase of four new vehicles in February 2015.
- The success of mechanised services relied on information being reported by residents, Quality Assurance Officers and Caretakers.
- There was a target to remove offensive graffiti within 24 hours.
- It was clarified that the mechanised services provided on estates and streets were delivered by two separate services, with different staff, budgets and depots,

although some equipment could be shared if required. The estates service was partially funded by Housing.

- Despite the reduction in staff levels, service performance had improved due to investments in new equipment and staff training.
- It was requested that benchmarked figures be provided to members on the performance of mechanised services.
- A resident queried the frequency of window cleaning services. It was indicated that there was different provision for different types of properties and further information would be sought.

The Chair thanked officers for their attendance.

RESOLVED

That further information on the proportion of lumber recycled and benchmarked performance data for mechanised services be circulated to members of the Committee.

77

SCAFFOLDING AND WORK PLATFORMS: WITNESS EVIDENCE AND EVALUATION OF COSTS (Item 9)

Paul Lightfoot, Direct Works Manager, presented a briefing note to the Committee, copy interleaved, which outlined the potential costs of providing an in-house scaffolding service. A discussion was had during which the following main points were made –

- The cost of providing scaffolding for responsive repairs work had recently decreased from around £1,100 per scaffold to £460. The Council was in the process of re-tendering its contract and a price of around £450 per scaffold was expected.
- It was commented that an in house service would increase costs, and the existing responsive repairs contract already enabled a quick response to urgent works.
- Responsive repairs were often required most during the winter months and any in-house service would need to consider seasonal demand and how to utilise staff during the summer. It was noted that the London Borough of Camden's service had previously been provided in-house and the retention of staff was a contributing factor to this no longer being the case. The Committee queried if an in-house service could make use of multi-skilled staff which worked on other services during periods of low demand.
- It was reported that some of the capital works schemes visited by the Committee the previous month still had scaffolding erected, when the contractor on site advised that it would be removed within three days.
- The use of alternatives to scaffolding was supported where possible. It was suggested that an estate based work plan should be prepared which would assess the need for scaffolding on all council properties and clarify if there were any viable alternatives, such as towers or cherry pickers, for each property.
- It was suggested that future capital works contracts could specify that the use of scaffolding should be minimised or scheduled in a way which causes the least disruption to residents. It was also noted that, as different capital works contractors used different scaffolding sub-contractors, the cost of scaffolding varied on different capital projects and the view was expressed that this added additional costs. It was requested that these costs be identified and circulated to members.
- Due to the urgent nature of responsive repairs, scaffold licences were occasionally sought retrospectively to ensure repairs were carried out as soon as possible.
- It was confirmed that the service did not yet have access to technology such as drones and thermal cameras but this could be investigated in future.
- It was suggested that an in-house scaffolding team could be used as an income generation opportunity and any initial cost would be recouped over time. Apprenticeships could be offered to improve the skills of local people. It was also

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commented that cuplock scaffolding may be cheaper and easier to assemble, if the Council was minded to pursue an in-house service.

- It was commented that some cherry pickers have a very small footprint which could assist with access to some properties.
- A resident provided an example of a scaffold that had been erected for three weeks without any substantial works taking place. It was queried what controls were in place to stop contractors leaving scaffolding unattended for a prolonged period of time. It was advised that officers check the scaffolding erected by contractors and would investigate the particular scaffold mentioned.

The Committee thanked Paul Lightfoot for his attendance.

RESOLVED:

That the costs of scaffolding on different capital works projects be circulated to members of the Committee.

The meeting ended at 8.55 pm

CHAIR