

London Borough of Islington

**Housing Scrutiny Committee - 1 December 2016**

Minutes of the meeting of the Housing Scrutiny Committee held at Committee Room 4, Town Hall, Upper Street, N1 2UD on 1 December 2016 at 7.30 pm.

**Present:**           **Councillors:**           O'Sullivan (Chair), Spall (Vice-Chair), Erdogan, Gantly, Hamitouche, O'Halloran, and Parker.

**Resident Observers:**   Rose-Marie McDonald and Jim Rooke

**Also present:**           Councillor D Ward

**Councillor Michael O'Sullivan in the Chair**

**227        APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Item A1)**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Gary Doolan and Angela Picknell.

**228        DECLARATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (Item A2)**

Councillor Olly Parker for Councillor Gary Doolan.

**229        DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS (Item A3)**

None.

**230        MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING (Item A4)**

**RESOLVED:**

That the minutes of the meeting held on 17 October 2016 be confirmed as a correct record and the Chair be authorised sign them.

**231        CHAIR'S REPORT (Item A5)**

The Chair was pleased to report that the Government had decided not to implement the Tenant Tax, however expressed his concern that key elements of the Housing and Planning Act were still to be implemented. The Committee noted that the Act would likely lead to a decrease in social housing provision in Islington.

The Chair invited Mr Tim Baster, a Genesis Housing Association tenant, to address the Committee. Mr Baster reported that Genesis tenants across London were dissatisfied with the housing association's approach to rent increases and its apparent support for the de-regulation of social housing. It was reported that Genesis residents on secure tenancies paying less than target rent on their homes were facing rent increases of up to 60% and the

housing association had refused to meet with tenants on this matter. It was explained that the housing association's internal complaints procedures and resident representation forums were not able to address this matter and Genesis tenants were asking local authority scrutiny committees across London to support their cause.

The Committee acknowledged that Genesis had few secure tenants in Islington. It was commented that it was understandable for the housing association to seek target rent levels as social housing had to be sustainable; however the Committee did consider that implementing such large rent increases without a phasing-in period and refusing to engage with the affected residents was unreasonable. It was agreed that the Chair would write to Genesis Housing Association to make representations on this matter.

**232 ORDER OF BUSINESS (Item A6)**

No changes were proposed to the order of business.

**233 PUBLIC QUESTIONS (Item A7)**

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

**234 HOUSING SERVICES FOR VULNERABLE PEOPLE: WITNESS EVIDENCE (Item B1)**

a) Evidence from Peter Bedford Housing Association

The Committee received a presentation from Clare Norton, Chief Executive Officer, and Pat Yesufu, Supported Housing Manager, of Peter Bedford Housing Association, on best practice in delivering housing services for vulnerable people.

The following main points were noted in the discussion:

- Peter Bedford Housing Association was a small, community housing association for vulnerable and excluded people. The housing association had 275 tenants across Islington and Hackney who were supported to live, work and learn together.
- Peter Bedford HA provided integrated and holistic support alongside housing services. Its residents were supported in making personal progress and taking responsibility as a means of empowering them to live independently. The organisation had high aspirations for its tenants and provided a range of support intended to develop employability and life skills. Referrals were also made to other support agencies as appropriate.
- The organisation valued inclusivity and emphasised the importance of building trust with residents. It was important for staff to empathise with tenants and have strong interpersonal skills.
- Peter Bedford HA had regular meetings with its tenants. Residents were able to choose how they were communicated with, either by letter, text, email or telephone.
- The housing association produced a handbook for tenants which provided tenancy information in an easy to read format.
- Peter Bedford HA had a person-centred approach and tailored support to their residents' needs. Older tenants were visited regularly as it was recognised that their needs may change over time.
- All staff had received fire safety training and specific evacuation procedures had been produced for disabled tenants.

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- The organisation's contractors were encouraged to report any concerns they had for residents' welfare, including issues related to antisocial behaviour and hygiene.
- Peter Bedford HA encouraged a strong community ethos by arranging resident meetings and local events. Tenants were supported in developing relationships with their neighbours and taking up local volunteering opportunities.
- The housing association provided a range of tenures, the minimum being two years. Those ending their tenancies were found suitable alternative accommodation and continued to receive support for six months. Higher-risk tenants were provided with a licence as a 'starter tenancy' before progressing to an assured shorthold tenancy.
- It was reported that vulnerable people found it particularly difficult to move into private sector accommodation as they faced difficulties in saving for deposits. It was noted that the London Borough of Hackney offered loans and grants to vulnerable residents for this purpose. It was commented that some vulnerable tenants would be able to maintain a private tenancy with appropriate support, and supporting vulnerable people to rent in the private sector reduced the demand for specialist housing provision.
- The organisation recognised the impact that working with vulnerable people can have on its staff and discussed wellbeing issues at monthly all staff meetings. A wellbeing programme for staff had also been introduced.
- It was advised that Peter Bedford HA would soon come to the end of its contractual arrangement with Islington Council.
- The Committee asked how Islington Council could improve its housing services for vulnerable people. Peter Bedford HA considered that Islington was a supportive local authority, however it was suggested that vulnerable people needed further support in saving for private sector deposits. It was also suggested that further certainty in regards to future contracting arrangements would be helpful for organisations providing support services.
- It was commented that vulnerable people could sometimes move to more accessible and affordable housing outside of Islington, however most tenants wanted to remain in the borough.

The Committee thanked Ms Norton and Ms Yesufu for their attendance.

### b) Evidence from Housing Property Services

The Committee received a presentation from Glenn McCorkindale, Property Services Programme Manager, on how Property Services worked with vulnerable people.

The following main points were noted in the discussion:

- Repairs operatives were advised of if tenants had a disability or other need which may affect their visit. Details of around 4,000 vulnerable tenants were held on the Housing Management IT system.
- Vulnerabilities were generally self-identified by tenants. Information was often captured through interactions with the housing service. For example, residents were asked about their vulnerabilities when moving house or completing a 'change of circumstances' form.
- Vulnerabilities were occasionally identified by housing staff. It was acknowledged that sometimes staff needed a greater understanding of the needs of vulnerable people and how these could affect their interactions with them. Such issues were addressed through staff training sessions.
- Repairs were prioritised for vulnerable tenants if the repair was detrimental to their needs; for example, repairs to essential electrical equipment or plumbing. Prioritising repairs in this way had a cost implication, however was considered necessary.

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Following a question, it was advised that the policy of prioritising repairs for vulnerable tenants was introduced several years ago and followed consultation with members.

- Discretionary repairs were provided to eligible vulnerable tenants, and other residents who met the eligibility criteria.
- There was a very high level of satisfaction with the adaptations service, with a satisfaction rating of 99.5% for 2015/16.
- There were two charge rates for the handyperson service; the standard rate was £28/hour, however those on means tested benefits were charged £10/hour.
- All gas appliances were required by law to be serviced every 12 months; however a number of tenants would not allow the Council's gas operatives to access their property. The service was reviewing why some tenants were reluctant to give access.
- The needs of vulnerable people were taken into account when producing major incident response plans.
- The Housing IT system recognised eight categories of vulnerability; blindness, learning disability, mental health, physical impairment, deafness, mobility issues, wheelchair user, and 'other'.
- The Committee expressed concern that the self-referral mechanism may mean that some vulnerable people could be unknown to the council's housing services. It was noted that referrals could be made to the Housing service through other means.
- Tenants needing adaptations could be referred from adult social care. The installation of minor adaptations, such as grab rails, was completed within the repair service's standard 20 day response period. More complex adaptations, such as installation of a level access shower, were completed within 40 days. The Committee requested additional data on how often these targets were met.
- Partners did not have access to the Housing IT system and maintained their own records of vulnerable tenants. It was confirmed that the new Housing repairs system would interact with the existing database of vulnerable people.
- It was queried if vulnerable tenants were responsible for repairs to their own privately fitted fixtures, or if the council would repair these. An example was given of a vulnerable tenant needing an urgent repair to their privately installed kitchen or bathroom. Officers were unsure of the Council's responsibilities in this instance and advised that they would report back to the Committee.
- Adaptations were generally limited to the inside of a tenant's property. The Committee identified that some tenants may need adaptations to communal areas. It was advised that these would be considered on request, and the council had previously installed access ramps and grab rails, however it was not always feasible to fully adapt communal areas. For example, it was suggested that installing a stair lift in a communal stairway could adversely impact other tenants, such as those with buggies.

The Committee thanked Glenn McCorkindale for his attendance.

### c) Evidence from Housing Operations

The Committee received a presentation from Jon Farrant, Head of Tenancy and Estate Services, on how Housing Operations worked with vulnerable people.

The following main points were noted in the discussion:

- The Housing Operations section was comprised of around 530 members of staff, including 200 caretakers. The majority of staff worked on the Council's estates and

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were in the unique position of having daily interaction with residents, sometimes in their own home.

- The service carried out 14,000 home visits to tenants every year in relation to income and other tenancy matters. It was commented that this provided a huge opportunity to engage with vulnerable tenants and ensure their needs were being met.
- Housing Operations staff, particularly those based in Area Housing Offices, were able to advocate for vulnerable tenants and could liaise with health and social services. It was emphasised that the service provided more than just a traditional landlord function.
- Housing Operations staff received safeguarding training, which was essential for working with vulnerable tenants. The service managed housing transfers for domestic violence victims when required.
- The service was able to make small adaptations to communal areas and would process these quickly. The service proactively identified where such works were required, but could also receive requests from tenants.
- Caretakers were trained to identify the needs of vulnerable tenants and report these back to the housing service. Officers considered this to be a vital link between tenants and the Council, and emphasised the importance of caretakers having their own 'patch' and developing relationships with the community.
- It was commented that estate inspections were particularly important for vulnerable people; as leaves, dog mess, litter and other obstacles were particularly hazardous for those with visual or mobility impairments.
- Officers commented that residents had a great deal of knowledge about their local area and community, particularly in relation to anti-social behaviour and neighbours with additional needs, and this information was of significant benefit to the council's housing services.
- Housing Operations had good working relationships with key partners. Social services and SHP staff were co-located in area housing offices.
- Officers acknowledged that there were aspects of the service which could be improved in regards to vulnerable people. It was commented that a greater depth of information on vulnerable tenants was needed to help provide a more effective service and would clarify resource requirements. It was suggested that developing a comprehensive needs matrix would help to achieve this. It was also suggested that data sharing between services could also be a barrier to providing effective services.
- It was suggested that helping tenants, carers and relatives to accurately identify the needs of vulnerable people would help to provide housing services more effectively and protect vulnerable people. An example was given of a recent referral from the child of an elderly person, who reported that her mother had to balance on a chair to close her curtains. Following the referral a winding mechanism was installed within a week. It was commented that adaptations were often small scale and simple to install, however such issues had to be known to the service.
- It was suggested that vulnerable people could benefit from a more holistic Housing Operations service, with staff delivering a wider range of services but focused on smaller local areas. It was thought that this would develop stronger relationships between officers and local communities.
- Following a question, it was clarified that estate parking was more expensive than on-street parking. This was because each driver was allocated their own parking bay.
- The Committee considered the fire risk caused by hoarding and that instances of hoarding were sometimes identified by Housing officers. Members considered the reasons why people hoard, and it was highlighted that some hoarders would not throw away any paperwork containing their address, for reasons of confidentiality. It

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was suggested that the Council could offer guidance to tenants on how to securely dispose of such information.

- It was suggested that Area Housing Offices could provide a more holistic service to people with cognitive disabilities, for example by helping them to complete forms. It was thought that this would contribute to the wellbeing of these tenants help them to manage their tenancy, finances, and to live independently.
- Officers emphasised the importance of reporting every instance of anti-social behaviour. ASB had a particularly adverse impact on vulnerable people and reporting helped to develop the council's data and ensured that issues would be dealt with.

The Committee thanked Jon Farrant for his attendance.

**235**

### **QUARTERLY REVIEW OF HOUSING PERFORMANCE (Q2 2016/17) (Item B2)**

Councillor Diarmaid Ward, Executive Member for Housing and Development, introduced the quarterly performance report.

The following main points were noted in the discussion:

- The Executive Member was pleased that 94 new affordable homes were built during the quarter.
- It was reiterated that the Partners' repairs backlog applied to major works only and not routine repairs. It was advised that the latest delays had been due to ongoing legal processes in relation to leaseholder properties.
- The Committee noted the significant increase in the number of homeless people nationwide, and that homelessness was increasingly caused by assured shorthold tenancies ending. The Executive Member commented that this was attributable to the Government's welfare reform measures.
- It was noted that the Government had decided not to implement the Tenant Tax, however other aspects of the Housing and Planning Act, including the sale of council houses, were still proposed to be implemented. The Executive Member encouraged those present to keep campaigning against the changes and to make representations to Gavin Barwell MP, Minister of State for Housing and Planning.
- A member queried how many people had been made homeless following eviction by the Council. The Executive Member advised that he did not have figures to hand; however eviction was only used as a last resort following continued disengagement from housing services.
- A member queried if the Council housed residents outside of the borough. In response, it was advised that those in need of temporary accommodation sometimes had to be located outside of the borough due to a lack of available provision in Islington. It was also noted that those seeking private rented accommodation were presented with options outside of the borough as rent levels were more affordable elsewhere.

#### **RESOLVED:**

That the progress against key performance indicators in Quarter 2 be noted.

**236**     **ESTATE SERVICES REVIEW - CARETAKING RECOMMENDATIONS UPDATE (Item B3)**

Jon Farrant, Head of Tenancy and Estate Services, introduced the item on changes to the caretaking service following the Committee's review of estate services management.

The Executive had accepted the Committee's recommendation of moving to a simpler, more direct management structure. As a result, the number of Estate Services Co-ordinators had increased and the number of Quality Assurance Officers had decreased, with the role of the retained Quality Assurance Officers being amended to provide greater support to caretaking staff. This was intended to ensure greater clarity around caretaking management arrangements.

It was queried if proposals for increased holiday cover for caretakers had been implemented. In response, it was advised that 12 relief caretakers were now available to provide full cover if a caretaker was absent for more than 10 days.

The Committee thanked Jon Farrant for his contribution.

The meeting ended at 10.00 pm

**CHAIR**