

London Borough of Islington

Housing Scrutiny Committee - 6 February 2018

Minutes of the meeting of the Housing Scrutiny Committee held at Committee Room 4, Town Hall, Upper Street, N1 2UD - Islington Town Hall on 6 February 2018 at 7.30 pm.

Present: **Councillors:** Spall (Vice-Chair, in the Chair), Diner, Gallagher, Gantly, Hamitouche and O'Sullivan.

Resident Observers: Rose Marie McDonald and Dean Donaghey

Also present: **Councillor:** Diarmaid Ward

Councillor Marian Spall in the Chair

346 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Item A1)

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Gary Doolan. Apologies for lateness were received from Councillor Mick O'Sullivan.

347 DECLARATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (Item A2)

None.

348 DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS (Item A3)

None.

349 CHAIR'S REPORT (Item A4)

None.

350 ORDER OF BUSINESS (Item A5)

No changes were proposed to the order of business.

351 PUBLIC QUESTIONS (Item A6)

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

352 SCRUTINY OF PARTNERS FOR IMPROVEMENT IN ISLINGTON (Item B1)

The Committee received a presentation from Tom Irvine, Interim Managing Director, John Venning, Asset Manager, and Doug Pope, Head of Housing, on the performance of Partners for Improvement in Islington.

The following main points were noted in the discussion:

- Partners had carried out a survey of councillors to establish why member perceptions of Partners service differed from the organisation's performance

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indicators. 11 responses had been provided which highlighted common themes and Partners had planned a number of actions as a result.

- Members had identified communication issues related to complex repairs. Partners acknowledged that the organisation could do better in this regard and would be reviewing its protocol.
- Members had identified performance issues with cyclical maintenance and decoration. Partners was to monitor this closely and continue to hold consultation and information events with residents about cyclical works.
- Members had suggested that Partners management did not engage with residents. The Interim Managing Director advised that he would personally telephone a sample of residents every month to hear their views directly.
- Members had commented that some Partners staff did not have an appropriate attitude when working with residents. It was advised that Partners would produce a briefing for all councillors on their staff performance management processes.
- Members had commented that Partners had inadequate complaints handling processes. In response, Partners had introduced a regular quality audit exercise. Management was also regularly reviewing a proportion of complaints to ensure that any learning was being embedded.
- Members had commented that Partners did not sufficiently meet the needs of vulnerable residents. As a result Partners had been invited to monthly Housing and Adult Social Services management team meetings to promote greater strategic join-up.
- Members highlighted that Partners did not appropriately address anti-social behaviour issues. In response, all ASB officers were undertaking training, and members were invited to raise any ASB issues directly with those officers.
- Members considered that there was not sufficient officer support for responding to member enquiries. Work was underway to address this by providing support to the Communications and Complaints Manager.
- Members had expressed dissatisfaction with Partners' approach to communication with councillors. In response, Partners had sought to adopt a new approach characterised by humility. The organisation would avoid presenting strong performance results, and would instead focus on the challenges the organisation faced.
- The Head of Housing demonstrated the complexity of cases considered by Partners by providing a case study of a vulnerable resident who was causing noise nuisance and anti-social behaviour. Partners explained how they worked with the Council, the Police, and made referrals to mental health and substance misuse support services. Members expressed dissatisfaction with the case study; commenting that they received similar casework on a regular basis, that the response of Partners was an expected level of service, and not exceptional.
- A member expressed concern that Partners seemed to characterise certain vulnerable people as 'perpetrators' of anti-social behaviour. Partners officers apologised for their choice of words.
- The Committee considered a briefing note written by a Partners tenant on the organisation's resident scrutiny arrangements. Partners representatives explained that the organisation had revised its resident scrutiny arrangements, and had transitioned from a closed forum to an open forum which was more reflective of the council's approach. Members of the previous forum were not satisfied with this approach and considered that the open forum did not adequately scrutinise Partners' performance. However, Partners officers contested that they had received positive feedback on the new scrutiny format, and the open format had helped to resolve property access issues, and improve other operational matters.
- The Committee considered the principles of Partners' asset management strategy. Properties were maintained to a contractual standard, similar to the decent homes

standard. Partners was required to maintain the value of housing stock on behalf of Islington Council.

- Properties managed under the PFI1 contract, which expired in 2033, would undergo a programme of external redecoration commencing in 2019. This would include works to roofs, windows and joinery. A major kitchen replacement programme would take place between 2023 and 2028 to ensure that no kitchen was over 20 years old. Boilers were replaced every 12 years.
- The PFI2 contract was due to expire in 2022. Cyclical decoration would end in 2020, however repairs would continue to be carried out as required. As the contract entered its final years, Partners would work with the council to ensure a smooth handback process, this would include joint stock condition surveys.
- Partners commented that the Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation and Liability for Housing Standards) Bill 2017 may result in a higher number of repair requests related to health and safety issues. It was commented that fitness standards were already incorporated into the PFI contracts, however Partners' legal officers were reviewing the content of the Bill. Following a question, it was commented that insulation may need to be installed in some properties if warmth is to be a condition of fitness.
- A member suggested that Partners should be seeking to improve properties, as opposed to maintaining them. It was also suggested that some Partners cyclical works had used inexpensive and poor quality components. In response, it was advised that properties were maintained to the contractual standard, which had improved the properties since the contract started.
- A member queried Partners' most recent performance indicators. In response, it was advised that all indicators were above contractual targets and were monitored on a monthly, quarterly, or annual basis. A member suggested that contractual standards agreed in the early 2000s may no longer be appropriate in 2018.
- It was commented that the Committee had not previously found Partners performance data to be credible, and it was asked if performance indicators had been revised to provide a more accurate representation of performance. In response, it was advised that indicators were specified in Partners' contracts with the Council, however there was a recognition that there were alternative ways to measure performance other than contractual indicators.
- The Committee asked if Partners disagreed with any comments made through the councillor survey. In response, it was advised that Partners did not consider all comments made to be fair, and it was difficult to respond to very general criticisms.
- A member commented that he did not receive an invitation to take part in the survey; in response Partners officers advised that they would be pleased to receive detailed feedback on their services.
- It was suggested that resident feedback on repairs should not be gathered by repairs operatives, and residents should have the opportunity to reflect on completed repairs before providing feedback. Members provided examples of poor quality repairs in Partners properties.
- Following a question, it was advised that Partners did seek to classify casework as either complex or non-complex, but officers recognised that this was not always straightforward. Complex cases were reviewed by the senior management team.
- It was expected that Partners would appoint a permanent managing director within the next six months.
- A member of the public highlighted significant and ongoing repairs issues with her Partners property. These included multiple leaks which had not been rectified; as a result carpet could not be fitted without it being ruined. The kitchen was also in a poor condition and the property was so cold that the heating had to be on constantly. The resident had two very young children with specific health needs. The resident commented that that she was facing fuel poverty and found Partners

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staff to be unhelpful. The issue was to be raised with the Housing Ombudsman. Partners officers apologised and agreed to look into the issue.

- A member of the public commented that Partners had a poor reputation among residents. In response it was advised that the organisation was seeking to engage with residents and address their problems.
- Dr Brian Potter of the Islington Leaseholders Association invited Partners officers to attend the April meeting of the Association and discuss the organisation's performance with leaseholders. Dr Potter suggested that performance indicators should be set and assessed by an independent organisation.
- Following a question, Partners clarified that relevant communications to residents did include email addresses and telephone numbers of Partners officers.
- A member of the public asked if the council had made financial deductions under the PFI contracts as a result of performance issues. In response it was advised that deductions had been applied on occasion, however these could be offset if Partners performed above target against other performance indicators. It was suggested that the council and Partners should be more transparent in regards to when and why deductions have been applied.
- Members of the public raised a number of ongoing repairs issues and complaints.
- In response to a question, it was advised that not all Partners surveyors were chartered surveyors. This was in line with industry standards for clerk of works roles.
- A member of the public commented on the need for tenants and leaseholders to have a stronger voice and hold their landlords to account, particularly following the lack of resident engagement in relation to the Grenfell Tower fire. The Committee considered the merits of organised resident scrutiny arrangements, noting that all housing providers should be open and transparent when engaging with their residents.
- It was suggested that Partners management should spend time working alongside frontline staff, as this may help to illustrate and identify performance issues.
- A member suggested that Partners could make greater use of digital communication with residents, such as text messaging and email.
- The Committee noted that Partners had organised community activities, including a Christmas party for older residents, and a cinema club.

The Committee thanked the Partners officers for their attendance.

The meeting ended at 9.20 pm

CHAIR