

London Borough of Islington

Housing Scrutiny Committee - 21 June 2018

Minutes of the meeting of the Housing Scrutiny Committee held at Committee Room 1, Town Hall, Upper Street, N1 2UD - Islington Town Hall on 21 June 2018 at 7.30 pm.

Present: **Councillors:** O'Sullivan (Chair), Gallagher, Hamitouche,
Heather, Mackmurdie, O'Halloran and Russell

Resident Observers: Rosie McDonald and Dean Donaghey

Councillor Michael O'Sullivan in the Chair

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Item 1)

Apologies were received from Councillors Lukes and Debono.

2 DECLARATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (Item 2)

Councillor Gantly substituted for Councillor Lukes.

3 DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS (Item 3)

There were no declarations of interest.

4 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING (Item 4)

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 13 March 2018 be confirmed as an accurate record of proceedings and the Chair be authorised to sign them.

5 CHAIR'S REPORT (Item 5)

The Chair, Councillor O'Sullivan welcomed everyone and in particular the newly elected councillors to the first meeting of the Housing Scrutiny Committee of the 2018/19 Municipal year.

The Chair informed Members that previous scrutiny review reports on housing related topics would be made accessible as a resource for new members and that he would circulate key website links.

The Chair informed Members that following serious concerns brought to his attention regarding fire safety on the Whitecross Estate, he had agreed to accept and consider this as an urgent item.

6 ORDER OF BUSINESS (Item 6)

The Chair advised that the urgent item on the Whitecross Estate would be considered as the first discussion item.

7 PUBLIC QUESTIONS (Item 7)

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

8 URGENT ITEM - FIRE SAFETY ON THE WHITECROSS ESTATE (Item C1)

Councillor O'Sullivan informed Members that due to the safety concerns on Whitecross Estate, Peabody had sent representatives to the meeting to address and respond to questions from the Committee.

Chief Operating Officer, Ashling Fox, Director of Technical Compliance and Quality, Tara Agarwal, and Group Director of Resident Services, Alison Muir introduced themselves to the Committee.

The following main points were noted in the discussion:

- Flammable insulation had been identified on Peabody Tower and St Mary's Tower. Peabody had implemented 'waking watch' arrangements, however members were concerned about the conduct of waking watch staff and Peabody's response to the fire, including communication with residents and the council.
- Peabody had not informed ward councillors of plans to decant vulnerable residents from their flats and were only made aware of this issue after receiving calls from concerned residents.
- Peabody had written to residents to advise on evacuation plans. Members were concerned about the effect of Peabody's letter on the residents as it would have increased their levels of stress and anxiety especially as the letter was received around the first anniversary of the Grenfell Tower Fire. The meeting was also told that residents were worried as Peabody staff had not been briefed on the evacuation plans, especially as enquiries resulted in residents been told to contact either fire officers or their councillors.
- The Committee was informed that reassurances about the conduct of waking watch staff were provided, however subsequent spot checks undertaken by Councillors Gallagher and Graham revealed that some staff did not know what they were supposed to be doing, were not wearing high vis vests, and did not have any form of identification on them. Members were concerned with the placement of tables and chairs on landings and in stairwells and escape routes, as this would create a trip hazard in the case of any fire outbreak.
- The Committee was concerned that, despite the fire risk which had been communicated to residents, no attempt had been made by Peabody to remove items of furniture and an unhinged door left abandoned in the building corridors.
- The Committee heard evidence that the meeting with the residents convened by Peabody could only be described as inadequate and disappointing. The Committee commented that sending out invitation letters should have been backed up with door knocking by Peabody staff and the use of electronic notice boards. It was also worrying that the fire service was not present, as this would have provided some reassurance to residents. It was also concerning that residents were continuing to hold barbecues in the vicinity of the buildings.
- In response to issues raised above, Ashling Fox, the COO of Peabody acknowledged that the whole issue had not been managed well and apologised on how the initial and subsequent responses had been handled. The COO advised Members that, although not an excuse for the way things were handled, there were

Housing Scrutiny Committee - 21 June 2018

issues with the waking watch contractors, and confirmed that training had now been provided, fire drills had been carried out, bulk waste items had been removed from the stairwells and a void property had been made available for staff to take breaks. Staff had also been informed not to smoke in the vicinity of the buildings. The COO informed Members that she had met with the Executive Member for Housing and Development to discuss the issues, and it was clear that waking watch had not carried out its responsibilities in a professional way.

- The COO advised Members that on receipt of the risk assessment report on 11 June, decisions were taken to immediately place a waking watch team on site, to decant residents who could not self-evacuate in reasonable time and for the Neighbourhood Team to start to undertake Personal Emergency Evacuation Plans (PEEPs) with vulnerable residents.
- The meeting was advised that, having received advice from its Fire Risk Assessor confirming that the external insulation contained combustible polystyrene elements and if ignited would produce fumes and lead to breathing difficulties for residents, a decision was taken by Peabody to install fire alarms in the buildings and to use waking watch staff as a safety measure in the interim. After the alarms are installed, some waking watch staff will remain to ensure that the alarms are working and provide assistance to residents if the need to evacuate arises.
- Members were informed that, following the Grenfell Tower fire, Peabody had upgraded its fire safety risk assessment to include not only the internal and escape routes of the building, but the envelope of the building also. This is how the combustible insulation had been discovered.
- The meeting was advised that Peabody had instructed its letting team to contact the residents about the situation with a view to decant vulnerable residents if necessary. In hindsight, Peabody acknowledged this could have been handled better, and agreed that the Council should have been informed to provide assistance.
- The Committee was advised that Peabody had contacted the local fire service to share its remedial plans, and the Borough Commander had been invited to the next residents meeting. Members were informed that Peabody was consulting with the fire service on a number of issues and in particular the impact of its remedial measures on fire fighting.
- Members were informed that all landlords are expected to notify the fire brigade of fire safety measures put in place, however landlords are required to undertake their own risk assessments.
- The meeting was informed by the Director of Technical Compliance that one of the shortcomings of Peabody's response was, having organised a fire drill session with the waking watch day crew, the handover to the night crew was not handled well, hence the standard of service provided by waking watch staff fell short of expectations.
- Remedial works staff were currently on site. Contractors and specialist consultants were to remove the insulation and replace it with a fire resistant material. In addition, Members were advised that a programme of fire safety works was being planned, with plans to be shared with residents in due course.

Housing Scrutiny Committee - 21 June 2018

- Councillor Ward informed Members that following the Grenfell Tower fire last year, the Council identified Braithwaite House as having ACM3 cladding and immediately took a decision in conjunction with ward councillors to send letters to residents informing them of the situation and its immediate plans to put in place fire wardens on site 24 hours a day so as to reassure residents. This was subsequently followed up with a residents meeting attended by ward councillors and the Borough Commander of the fire brigade where issues were clarified.
- In addition to the above the Council still felt it essential to send letters to residents detailing the safety measures that were to be put in place, with ward councillors visiting the building and speaking to residents to allay their anxiety. The meeting was informed that work commenced to remove the cladding on Braithwaite House with minimal inconvenience to the residents, and this was to be replaced with non-combustible cladding.
- Councillor Ward acknowledged that although the situation on the Whitecross Estate was different from Braithwaite House, an important lesson to be shared was that communication with residents must remain paramount on all issues, and especially in instances of fire safety concerns.
- Members were concerned that the council was only made aware of the situation by Peabody's lettings team contacting council and requesting property nominations as Peabody was considering where to decant its residents.
- The meeting was advised that 81 residents had been identified as vulnerable and resources had been made available to support them. In addition, a FAQ letter had been sent to residents clarifying issues such as banning barbeques around the building.
- In response to a question, it was advised that Peabody was reviewing all potential fire risks, including the condition of fire doors as gas pipes. The Technical Director acknowledged that some ancillary works had already been identified and the estimated time for completion of work was approximately 6 months.
- A member was concerned about Peabody's relationship with their contractors. It was suggested that the organisation had not carried out sufficient due diligence on the waking watch contractor, with the result that instead of safeguarding residents, its actions had created additional fire hazards in the building.
- The Service Director, Homes and Communities acknowledged that the Council had experienced similar issues at Braithwaite House and lessons learnt will be shared with Peabody. The Council recognised the challenges with waking watch teams and handover briefings between day and night crew. The Director advised that this was addressed by the Council by ensuring that the Neighbourhood Service Manager is fire qualified, briefings with tenants were undertaken by concierge managers to ensure that the message is controlled, and all concierge staff had completed fire training.
- A member reiterated the importance for Peabody to always monitor both staff and contractors. Spot checks by Councillors confirmed that training had not been provided, and members noted concerns that waking watch staff were primarily security staff as opposed to trained fire wardens.

Housing Scrutiny Committee - 21 June 2018

- Peabody was to install new fire doors in the properties and anticipated that this would take around six weeks. A member was concerned by this, commenting that the timeline was unrealistic. In response to whether the expenditure incurred would be borne by tenants, the meeting was informed that works would be completed to ensure the building was made safe and costs will be solely borne by Peabody.
- A member was concerned that Peabody's website makes no reference to the current fire issue which further demonstrates its lack of communication with residents.
- The Chair was concerned with Peabody's lack of procedures and guidelines on handling emergency situations. In response, the meeting was advised that Peabody has a disaster recovery and continuity policy in place, however there had been a recent focus on ACM cladding issues, and the current fire risks on the Whitecross Estate presented different challenges. The Technical Director of Compliance acknowledged that staff training issues would be taken on board, and the organisation would work with Council officers to learn from their experiences.
- With regard to the fitting of wireless smoke alarms in flats, the meeting was informed that although Peabody was consulting with the local fire brigade about this issue, this was an interim measure in conjunction with the use of the waking watch, which would be removed when the insulation has been removed. Members were advised that this decision was as a result of changing from a stay put to simultaneous evacuation strategy.
- The Technical Compliance Director advised that the wet and dry risers in both towers had been checked and were working.
- Members were informed that no residents had been decanted at present, however Peabody had been in touch with 55 residents who may need to be moved due to their circumstances.
- In response to concerns about the lack of resident involvement, the meeting was informed that Peabody was currently working to resurrect its resident scrutiny arrangements. This would help to ensure that residents are regularly informed all issues.
- Councillor O'Sullivan thanked Peabody representatives for attending the meeting and proposed an additional meeting to consider all fire safety issues at the Peabody and St Mary's towers, gather evidence from residents, and make recommendations which would be sent to the Executive Member for Housing and Development, the Chief Executive of Peabody, and the Homes and Communities Agency.

RESOLVED:

- (i) That an additional meeting be convened to consider evidence from residents on the Whitecross estate about fire safety;
- (ii) That the Executive Member for Housing and Development be asked to share information on how the Council managed fire risks at Braithwaite House with other housing providers in Islington.

9 ARRANGEMENTS AND TERMS OF REFERENCE (Item 8)
RESOLVED:

That the membership, terms of reference and dates of meetings of the Housing Scrutiny Committee for the municipal year 2018/19 be noted.

10 QUARTERLY REVIEW OF HOUSING PERFORMANCE (Q4 2017/18) (Item B1)
Councillor Diarmaid Ward, Executive Member for Housing and Development, presented the quarterly performance update.

The following main points were noted in the discussion:

- Members were informed that the Council's target for downsizing residents has been challenging despite offering financial incentives. Members were advised that the take up for the new scheme built specifically for over 55's in Kings Square has been disappointing, however the Council would continue reviewing this issue.
- Members were advised that the target for new affordable homes in 2018/18 remains 466, however as house building principally lies with housing associations and private developers, the Council has limited control on the delivery timescales, however the Council would continue supporting measures to achieve the target.
- With regards to the First Time Fix target of 85%, Members were advised that the reason for the fall in performance for responding to emergency repairs was due to the high volume of repair request experienced during the poor weather between January and March. In most of the cases the team were dealing with more 'make safes' however the Council would be looking at how it will respond to these peaks in the future. The Executive Member for Housing informed Committee that he would bring back to the Committee on specific measures on how to deal with these repairs at a future meeting.
- Members were informed that its first batches of operatives having completed their multi skill training programme are now being provided further support in the field to practice their new skills which will be of benefit to both the residents and the operatives in the long run as operatives with multi skills could address issues while in a property instead of calling out for a specialist.
- Councillor Ward informed Members that although there had been no reported glitches with the new IT system, further improvements are to be introduced in the second phase of the project which would allow managers monitor the performance of their staff on a daily basis.
- Members welcomed the good news that the number of households in nightly booked temporary accommodation had fallen, due to the enormous work of staff and in particular the Trail Blazer Programme which recognises the need to intervene before people become homeless. Councillor Ward welcomed the central government programme but was concerned with the impact when funds are withdrawn in 18 months. Members were told that the Council recognises the need to work with landlords, employers by intervening early on issues such as universal credit, rent plan etc, all measures that will mitigate homelessness. It was noted that a main reason for homelessness was the end of an assured shorthold tenancy.
- In response to a question of young people trained with multi skills to be involved in repairs especially for elderly tenants, the Service Director , Homes and Communities

Housing Scrutiny Committee - 21 June 2018

advised that the Councils' apprentices placed within the Council's repair services carry out remedial works such as removal of trip hazards while in a property but are not responsible for repairs of internal doors.

- In response to the possible use of the Community centres during winter, meeting was informed that legislation requires all authorities to open doors of community centres for homelessness called Severe Weather Emergency Protocol. A suggestion that a top ten list of how to prevent repairs be printed on documentation sent to residents was noted.
- A request that Officers separate the present combined performance reporting of gas servicing from repairs was noted. There was concern that considering gas repairs is carried out once in a year, one and not 3 to 5 reminder letter was sufficient especially as in most cases it could be due to residents work commitments. A suggestion on whether gas servicing could be done in a flexible way was noted.
- The meeting was informed that for future meetings, Partners Performance reports will not only include figures but include examples of the quality of works carried out.

RESOLVED:

That the progress against key performance indicators to the end of Quarter 4 2017/18 be noted.

11

SCRUTINY TOPICS AND WORK PROGRAMME 2018/19 (Item B2)

The Committee indicated that it wished to carry out two main reviews, responsive repairs and homelessness. As part of the review on responsive repairs, the Committee will include issues around communications.

In addition the Committee would revisit a number of previous scrutiny reviews such as fire safety and consider it in conjunction with the Hackett Review on fire safety as an officer update.

As part of the yearly performance of housing associations, Members agreed to invite both Peabody and Guinness Trust to meetings

RESOLVED:

That the work plan be agreed, subject to the inclusion of reviews of responsive repairs, homelessness.

The meeting ended at 9.50 pm

CHAIR