

Housing Scrutiny Committee - 3 October 2017

Minutes of the meeting of the Housing Scrutiny Committee held at Committee Room 4, Town Hall, Upper Street, N1 2UD on 3 October 2017 at 7.30 pm.

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

Resident Observers: Rose-Marie McDonald and Dean Donaghey

Councillor Marian Spall in the Chair

301 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Item A1)

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Mick O'Sullivan, Gary Doolan, and Mouna Hamitouche.

302 DECLARATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (Item A2)

Councillor Heather substituted for Councillor O'Sullivan.
Councillor O'Halloran substituted for Councillor Doolan.

303 DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS (Item A3)

None.

304 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING (Item A4)

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the previous meeting held on 4 September 2017 be confirmed as a correct record and the Chair be authorised to sign them.

305 CHAIR'S REPORT (Item A5)

None.

306 ORDER OF BUSINESS (Item A6)

No changes were proposed to the order of business.

307 **PUBLIC QUESTIONS (Item A7)**

A member of the public advised of a missed appointment with the Housing Repairs service. Officers advised that they would take this up outside of the meeting.

A member of the public enquired about changes to the funding of estate environmental improvements, and how decisions on such improvements would be made. It was advised that a written response would be provided outside of the meeting.

308 **FIRE SAFETY SCRUTINY REVIEW: WITNESS EVIDENCE (Item B1)**

a) Paul Hobbs, Borough Commander of the London Fire Brigade, provided evidence to the Committee.

The following main points were noted in the discussion:

- The Borough Commander was responsible for the operational response to fires in Islington. Around 80 individuals were employed by the Fire Brigade in Islington, based across two sites.
- Two fire engines were assigned to the borough, however engines based in neighbouring boroughs were also available in the event of an emergency. The nearest available fire engine was always despatched to attend a fire. It was commented that around 40 fire engines attended the Grenfell Tower fire.
- Fire fighters spent less than 10% of their working day responding to fires. The remainder of their time was spent carrying out familiarisation visits and training.
- The Fire Brigade was not responsible for carrying out fire safety risk assessments. This was the responsibility of the building owner; however, the Fire Brigade carried out safety audits for properties over 18 metres in height to ensure that the Responsible Person had carried out the risk assessment correctly.
- If the Fire Brigade identified a safety risk, then a range of powers were available to enforce corrective action. The most severe of these was a Prohibition Notice, which restricted use of the building.
- The Fire Brigade carried out youth engagement work, including the LIFE (Local Intervention Fire Education) project. This was a one-week intensive course which taught practical firefighting skills, and was aimed at young people involved in ASB or known to the criminal justice system. It was commented that there was not a suitable facility in the borough to provide this project locally, however the local Fire Brigade was hoping to acquire a suitable facility in the near future. Islington residents had to travel to neighbouring boroughs to take part.
- The Fire Brigade also operated a fire cadet programme which allowed young people to gain a BTEC qualification and develop their skills, and a Youth Commissioner scheme. These activities were open to all young people.
- The Fire Brigade administered a Fire Safety Investment Fund which provided preventative equipment to vulnerable residents. Around £31,000 had been spent in Islington; typical purchases included fire retardant bedding, and sprinkler systems for bed bound residents.
- The Fire Brigade carried out joint work with the council; it was reported that a senior officer would be co-located at 222 Upper Street every Tuesday morning from the following week onwards. This would strengthen collaborative working between the council and Fire Brigade.
- The Fire Brigade was invited to comment on planning applications, however this work was not carried out at the local operational level.

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- The Committee enquired about the challenges of tackling fires in high-rise blocks. Although tower blocks had wet or dry risers, these were only effective for fighting fires inside buildings, not external fires such as the Grenfell Tower fire. Fires to external material, such as cladding, needed to be tackled externally; however the Fire Brigade did not have ladders tall enough to tackle external fires at great height.
- Although it would be possible to commission fire engines with very tall ladders of over 100 meters, these would require large vehicles which would not be suitable for many of London's streets. It was commented that such vehicles would need to be parked in a large space and secured before the ladder was extended. Working at greater heights also presented risks to fire fighters.
- Members commented on the successful youth engagement work carried out by the Police Safer Neighbourhood Team, and suggested that further partnership work in this area between the Police and Fire Brigade could be effective.
- The Fire Brigade offered some apprenticeships in office-based roles.
- The Committee asked if the London Fire Brigade was confident that tenant management organisations in Islington were sufficiently aware of fire risks and their responsibilities. In response, it was advised that the Brigade was required to be familiar with hundreds of buildings and could not comment on individual cases. However, it was commented that succession planning was particularly important for resident-led housing management organisations, as smaller organisations tended to only have one person who was aware of fire risks and responsibilities. It was suggested that organisations that did not have sufficient expertise to carry out a fire safety risk assessment should commission an independent assessor to do so.
- The Committee highlighted the budget cuts to the fire service and asked if these had a detrimental effect on the service's responsiveness. In response, it was advised that although the resources to deal with major incidents were more limited, the cuts had not had a detrimental impact on the service's response times. Islington's Fire Brigade was able to respond to fires within six minutes of a call being received.
- Islington used to have six fire engines stationed inside the borough. Although Islington now had four fewer engines, response times had been maintained through an increased focus on fire prevention. The London Fire Brigade had increased their focus on home safety visits, hoarding, and problematic smoking in recent years.
- Major fire incidents requiring several fire engines resulted in resources being deployed from across London. It was explained that the Merton Control Room monitored the activity of London's fire engines and relocated available teams to ensure that no area was left vulnerable to fire.
- The Mayor of London had allocated £6 million for new fire safety equipment. It was commented that the Fire Brigade was already in the process of procuring new fire engines, however since the Grenfell Tower fire the procurement specification had been revised to require taller ladders.
- In response to a question, the Borough Commander advised that Islington Council appeared to be very proactive in managing fire safety risks, and was very willing to engage with the Fire Brigade. The Borough Commander explained that he had only been in post for three months, however he had not faced any barriers to working with the council, which was not the case in all boroughs.
- The Borough Commander believed that the Grenfell Tower fire would result in significant changes to how fire risks are managed, and thought that there would be implications for both high rise and low rise properties.
- The London Fire Brigade had appointed a dedicated Grenfell Tower team to assist the national inquiry.
- It was suggested that fire fighters could make use of breathing apparatus with a greater capacity to tackle major fires, however it was acknowledged that these were heavier and as a result presented an additional risk to fire fighters.

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- The Borough Commander commented that greater information on the location and needs of disabled and vulnerable people would help in an emergency, however clear guidance would be needed on where the information was stored and who would be responsible for maintaining its accuracy. It was noted that an information box was being installed at Braithwaite House which would hold such information.
- A member of the public queried if parked cars in cul-de-sacs obstructed access for fire engines. In response, it was advised that this could be an issue, however fire engines were able to pump water over a considerable distance and did not need to be parked immediately next to a fire. In an emergency fire fighters would pick up and move vehicles. Officers advised that they were aware of parking obstruction issues and were reviewing estate parking arrangements.
- Dr Brian Potter, Chair of the Islington Leaseholders Association, commented that he had been in correspondence with officers about the requirement for leaseholders to fit fire safe doors to their properties, and queried the legal basis for requiring leaseholders to install these doors at their own expense. In response, officers advised that the entrance doors and frames of leaseholder properties were the leaseholder's responsibility under the terms of their lease. It was clarified that the Fire Brigade and Building Control were the enforcing authorities for fire safety concerns, however the council as landlord had a duty of care to all residents in its properties and would take action in instances where leaseholders would not fit fire safe doors.

The Committee thanked the Borough Commander for his contribution.

- b) Jan Hart, Service Director for Public Protection, provided evidence to the Committee on the council's Emergency Planning function.

The following main points were noted in the discussion:

- The council had statutory duties under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 to prepare for emergencies. The council's Emergency Planning service was comprised of three officers who worked in partnership with other services and agencies to meet the council's duties under the Act.
- Islington Council had an emergency planning officer and corporate director on duty at all times in case of emergencies. The council had also appointed 23 Local Authority Liaison Officers (LALOs), council officers who were trained in emergency response and making decisions in emergency situations. 60 staff were trained to manage rest centres, and 150 staff in total were available to attend an emergency situation if required.
- Most local authorities appointed around five LALOs, however Islington's approach was that a number of staff should be able to respond and make decisions in emergency situations.
- London boroughs offered mutual aid to each other in emergency situations. Islington officers had assisted Kensington and Chelsea following the Grenfell Tower fire, and Camden following the evacuation of the Chalcots Estate. Islington's own emergency plans had been revised in light of officers' experiences of attending those emergencies. In particular, it was recognised that the council needed to be prepared to deal with larger emergencies which continued for several weeks. Islington Council would be seeking to train more officers in emergency response as a result.
- Mutual aid was requested by triggering London Local Authority Gold Arrangements, whereby a single London local authority chief executive would take control of the strategic response, and a London Local Authority Coordination Centre would be established to coordinate emergency activities.

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- Following a question, the Service Director commented that the council was well prepared to deal with emergency situations, and Islington Council staff attending emergencies in other boroughs had been very well received. However, emergencies on the scale of the Grenfell Tower fire required cross-London support and coordination.
- A member commented on his experience of a recent fire in the early hours of the morning. He advised that the fire fighters attending the scene did not seem to be aware of the council's emergency procedures, and concerned residents contacted an elected member for support, who was not aware of who to contact. The situation was resolved by the councillor contacting a corporate director by telephone. In response, it was advised that out-of-hours emergencies should be reported to Contact Islington on 020 7527 2000; which was staffed 24 hours a day. It was also commented that the emergency services control room was able to contact the council in an emergency. It was advised that a note would be circulated to all councillors to clarify this position.
- A member commented on the criticism of Kensington and Chelsea Council following the Grenfell Tower fire, in particular the delay to triggering London Local Authority Gold arrangements and requesting mutual aid from other boroughs. It was queried if Islington Council understood its limitations, and at what point Gold command would be triggered. In response, it was advised that whilst Islington was well resourced to deal with localised emergencies, an incident on the scale of the Grenfell Tower fire would result in Gold command being triggered immediately.
- Officers commented on the council's swift response times. It was noted that following the Finsbury Park terrorist attack council officers were in attendance and offering assistance within 30 minutes.
- Islington's Emergency Planning service was in weekly contact with the council officers on emergency response duty.
- The Committee suggested that training should be given to councillors to help them to better understand how they can assist in an emergency situation. It was suggested that a demonstration of how Gold command was triggered and worked in practice would also be useful.
- The Committee queried the emergency evacuation plans for disabled and vulnerable people. It was advised that Housing and Adult Social Services held details of disabled and vulnerable residents, and in the case of a planned evacuation a multi-agency meeting would be held to prepare for evacuation and after care. For example, it was commented that rest centres were not appropriate for vulnerable people with complex needs, and social services would need to find suitable temporary accommodation before the evacuation commenced. However, officers advised that in an urgent emergency situation with limited time to prepare the reality would be officers knocking on doors to establish who was in each property and identify their needs. In that scenario, information on resident vulnerabilities would be ascertained from the residents themselves and their neighbours, friends and family. The Committee considered that this was not sufficient to guarantee the safety of disabled and vulnerable people, and suggested that a list of disabled or vulnerable people would support emergency evacuation efforts.
- Islington Council had a contract with the Red Cross to provide emergency clothing, toiletries and bedding if required. Provision would also be made to provide residents with emergency money.
- A member of the public queried if emergency and temporary accommodation was located in the borough. In response, it was advised that rest centres would be located in the borough. If residents were unable to return to their home then they would likely be offered hotel accommodation which could be outside of the borough, however each resident would have a named contact at the council to liaise with.

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- A member of the public queried evacuation procedures for schools. In response, it was advised that schools held test evacuations once a term. Schools were responsible for arranging these, however the role of the Emergency Planning service was to ensure that schools were aware of their responsibilities.

The Committee thanked Jan Hart for her contribution.

- c) John Venning, Asset Manager at Partners for Improvement in Islington, presented to the Committee on Partners' fire safety work.

The following main points were noted in the discussion:

- Partners managed the council's street properties. These properties tended to be older and faced different risks to more modern housing blocks on estates. The majority of Partners' properties were low rise buildings of brick construction with timber floors. None of the properties had external cladding and none were over five storeys in height.
- Partners had its own fire safety policy which was most recently audited in February 2017. Fire risk assessments were carried out for all Partners properties.
- Partners monitored the fire safety of its properties through regular fire safety meetings, contract performance meetings with Islington Council, and attendance at Islington Homes and Estates Safety Board meetings. It was emphasised that Partners took its fire safety responsibilities very seriously.
- The most significant fire risk to Partners properties was the lack of linked fire protection systems. For this reason, linked fire alarms were to be installed in all Partners properties. This work would be carried out by Islington Council and would commence in 2018, concluding in 2020.
- Fire risks in communal areas were re-assessed regularly. High risk properties were assessed every six months, other properties were assessed every two years. Some properties had emergency lighting and this was tested on an annual basis.
- Partners had recently introduced a zero tolerance policy to keeping items in communal areas. Partners used to operate a more lenient 'managed use' policy however this had been revised to minimise fire risks.
- Partners was concerned about the fire risks associated with hoarding, and made referrals to the London Fire Brigade for home fire safety visits on a regular basis.
- All Partners tenants had received evacuation guidance following the Grenfell Tower fire. This was provided by the council to ensure that Partners tenants received the same information as Islington Council tenants.
- The Committee noted the fire safety advice in Partners publications and suggested that fire safety advice should be provided in different languages and large print as standard.
- The Committee asked if Partners was satisfied that their residents knew what to do in the event of a fire; and asked if Partners had a register of their vulnerable and disabled tenants which they could refer to in the event of a fire. In response, it was advised that Partners did maintain a list of disabled and vulnerable tenants, including hoarders, however this largely relied on tenants self-identifying as vulnerable or disabled and it was acknowledged that the data may not be complete. To improve their data, all Partners staff were required to feedback any concerns about vulnerable residents to their manager.
- Following a question, it was advised that Partners worked with other agencies to support hoarders and remove combustible material from their properties.
- The Committee asked if Partners was confident that they were taking all reasonable steps to prevent fires, and if they had any specific fire safety concerns. In response it was advised that Partners constantly monitored and reviewed fire risks.

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- Following the audit of Partners' fire safety policy in February 2017, Partners had amended internal forms for reviewing fire risks.
- It was queried if Partners would re-audit their fire safety policy following the Grenfell Tower fire. It was advised that Partners had sought the advice of a consultant on this matter in August 2017, and the advice was that a re-audit was not required. Partners was confident that their policy remained fit for purpose.
- Concerns were expressed about the fire risks to vulnerable leaseholders. A member commented that landlords did not need to access leasehold properties on a regular basis, and as a result there may be vulnerable leaseholders who were not known to Partners. Partners recognised this risk, and commented that they did try to engage with leaseholders on a regular basis, however it was also commented that most hoarders tended to be tenants.
- A member of the Committee highlighted properties in Milner Square with very high ceilings. Smoke alarms had been installed on those ceilings, however it was not possible to test or deactivate them without a ladder. Residents were using broomsticks to test and deactivate them but this could damage the alarms. It was suggested that the alarms were not fit for purpose and remote control alarms were better suited to the properties. In response, it was advised that the alarms were installed in 2003 and there were no plans to install new alarms before the next scheduled maintenance work in 2018. The Committee suggested that such issues should be addressed on a more regular basis.
- The audit of Partners' fire safety policy was carried out by an independent health and safety consultant. The Committee suggested that a second opinion on the policy may provide additional reassurance.
- It was advised that residents evacuating in emergency situations were able to take their pets with them.
- Following a question from Dr Brian Potter, Chair of the Islington Leaseholders Association, it was confirmed that fire safety improvements to Partners properties would be recharged to leaseholders. A notice of intent was due to be issued in the near future.

The Committee thanked John Venning for his contribution.

309 HOUSING COMMUNICATIONS SCRUTINY REVIEW: WITNESS EVIDENCE (Item B2)

- a) Tom Irvine, Deputy Managing Director of Partners for Improvement in Islington, presented to the Committee on how Partners communicates with its residents.

The following main points were noted in the discussion:

- All new Partners tenants were provided with a 'new tenant handbook' of key information and received a home visit within four weeks of their moving date.
- Partners circulated a newsletter to residents five times a year, as well as additional direct mailings on topical issues such as fire safety.
- The majority of residents contacted Partners by telephone; the organisation received around 7,000 calls a month. Partners' call handling system was simplified in 2016 to provide callers with three options; gas and heating, repairs, or anything else. This helped residents to get to the right person quicker.
- All front line staff received the council's Make Every Contact Count training, which trained staff to identify problems and refer residents to early help and support services.
- Partners worked with residents to improve their communications, and had recently consulted with leaseholders to improve their leaseholder FAQs.

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- Whilst response time targets for complaints and members' enquiries were met, Partners had recently introduced new processes to ensure greater quality control over responses to members' enquiries.
- Partners' heads of service met monthly to discuss complaints and review complaint responses. The number of complaints received had fallen in recent years.
- Ensuring good communication was one of Partners' priorities for 2017/18.
- The Committee queried Partners' internal performance statistics which suggested the quality of responses to correspondence had improved to a score of 97/100 in July 2017. It was explained that Partners assessed their responses against 10 criteria which included accuracy, tone, and joined-up working. The Committee suggested that the assessment criteria was not sufficiently robust, as member casework regularly highlighted instances of poor service from Partners. The Committee considered that the performance information provided was not credible, and suggested that Partners' quality assessment criteria should be more challenging.
- A member of the Committee suggested that Partners' processes were not easy to navigate, and this could be distressing for vulnerable people. It was emphasised that Partners was passionate about providing a good service to residents, and trained staff in recognising the needs of vulnerable residents.
- Partners reported a range of key performance indicators to Islington Council on a regular basis and these were evaluated for accuracy. Partners was seeking to engage with councillors in regards to why their perceptions of Partners' service varied considerably from the organisation's performance indicators.
- It was suggested that Partners should consult with residents on its quality assessment criteria to better align its performance reporting to the needs of residents.
- The Committee requested that an additional meeting be arranged to consider Partners performance in greater detail.
- A member of the public reported dissatisfaction with Partners and commented that work was needed to build trust between Partners and residents.
- Dr Brian Potter, Chair of the Islington Leaseholders Association, queried the methodology of Partners satisfaction surveys, and suggested that Islington Leaseholders Association could assist with reviewing the satisfaction surveys sent to Partners leaseholders. It was also suggested that Partners would benefit from a more robust leaseholder forum.
- A member of the public suggested that members of the Housing Scrutiny Committee could attend and contribute to the Partners resident scrutiny forums.

The Committee thanked Tom Irvine for his contribution.

- b) Matt West, Head of Repairs and Maintenance, provided evidence to the Committee on the online repairs reporting system.

The following main points were noted in the discussion:

- The online repairs reporting system was not intended to replace traditional routes of reporting repairs, but was intended to supplement the existing service, provide choice to residents, modernise the service and generate savings.
- The repairs service previously had an online form for reporting repairs, but this was not integrated with the repairs management system. The form would generate an email which an officer would then need to manually input into the system, often following up with a telephone call to the resident to clarify the details. As a result the system did not save time or resources.

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- The new online repairs reporting system was integrated with the repairs management system, so repairs logged online generated cost savings by not requiring officer time to input the information.
- The online repairs reporting system was designed to be user friendly and operated on a pictogram basis, which was intended to overcome language barriers and knowledge gaps.
- Officers recognised the limits of the system. The system was only able to handle repair requests from directly managed tenants, did not cover communal repairs, and the system was not appropriate for reporting emergency repairs. If a repair appeared to be an emergency (for example, tenants were in danger or the security of the property was compromised) then the system suggested that the resident call Housing Direct to ensure the issue was dealt with quickly.
- The system was being developed further to enable residents to book their gas service online.
- Uptake of the online repairs reporting system had been low, although feedback received had been generally positive. The council needed to encourage residents to make use of the system to realise the cost savings the system offered.
- The Committee suggested that reporting communal repairs online would be a helpful development.
- The Committee thought it would be helpful if the system could generate a repair request for Partners or TMOs. Officers agreed, however explained that this would require significant development work and the service would rather focus on establishing the system for directly managed tenants first. Tom Irvine, Deputy Managing Director of Partners for Improvement in Islington, commented that Partners had an online repairs reporting system, however was interested in the council's system and would be keen to learn from the council's experiences.

The Committee thanked Matt West for his contribution.

310 REVIEW OF WORK PLAN (Item B3)

Noted.

The meeting ended at 10.10 pm.

CHAIR