

Housing Scrutiny Committee - 13 March 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 13 March 2018 at 7.30 pm.

Present: **Councillors:** O'Sullivan (Chair), Gallagher, Gantly, and Hamitouche.

Resident Observers: Rose-Marie McDonald and Dean Donaghey

Councillor Michael O'Sullivan in the Chair

353 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Item A1)

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Diner, Spall and Doolan.

354 DECLARATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (Item A2)

None.

355 DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS (Item A3)

None.

356 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETINGS (Item A4)

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the previous meetings held on 30 January 2018 and 6 February 2018 be agreed as a correct record and the Chair be authorised to sign them.

357 CHAIR'S REPORT (Item A5)

The Chair noted that it was the last Housing Scrutiny Committee meeting of the municipal year and thanked all members, officers and witnesses who had contributed to the work of the Committee.

The Chair reiterated the concerns expressed at the previous meeting on Partners' approach to working with vulnerable people. The Chair requested that the Committee receive Partners' policy on anti-social behaviour, and further information on how the organisation works with people with disabilities and mental health issues.

A member noted that he had not received an email inviting him to take part in Partners' survey of councillors. It was also noted that Partners had not accepted the invitation to attend a meeting of the Islington Leaseholders' Association. The Chair advised that these matters should be taken up with the Executive Member for Housing and Development.

358 ORDER OF BUSINESS (Item A6)

No changes were proposed to the order of business.

359 PUBLIC QUESTIONS (Item A7)

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

360 QUARTERLY REVIEW OF HOUSING PERFORMANCE (Q3 2017/18) & ANNUAL EXECUTIVE MEMBER PRESENTATION (Item B1)

Councillor Diarmaid Ward, Executive Member for Housing and Development, presented his annual report to the Committee. Jo Murphy, Director of Homes and Communities, also contributed to the presentation and discussion.

The following main points were noted in the discussion:

- The Executive Member provided an update on the council's work to replace flammable cladding on its housing blocks. The work to remove ACM3 cladding on Braithwaite House commenced three working days after it was identified, and the cladding was expected to be replaced in October 2018.
- Work was underway to convert dry risers to wet risers in the council's tallest blocks. The risers in Michael Cliffe House had been converted in August 2017, and the risers in Peregrine House would be converted in October 2018.
- Although much of the media attention following the Grenfell Tower fire had focused on the safety of high-rise blocks, the safety of low-rise blocks was also a priority. The Executive Member advised that linked fire alarms would be installed in street properties, which did not have compartmentation to contain a fire to single unit.
- A member queried if works had been carried out to insulate street properties, and if not, would this work be carried out in future. Another member advised that insulation work was carried out to street properties some years ago, however it was not known how many properties had benefitted at that time. The Executive member advised that he would investigate this matter further.
- It was explained that the rebranding of the Housing Operations service to 'Homes and Communities' would better reflect the service's work to support the communities living in the council's homes, which was a priority of the council. The service was working with colleagues across the council to develop an early intervention approach which would support the wellbeing of Islington residents.
- The Executive Member advised that the Homes and Communities leadership team had been restructured around the service's priorities, and explained that further work to transform the service would take place throughout 2018. It was hoped that the service would develop a more trusting relationship with residents.
- The Committee expressed concern about the roll out of Universal Credit. A total of 359 council tenants were in receipt of Universal Credit; the average rent debt of claimants was over six times the average debt. The council was holding bi-monthly meetings with the Department for Work and Pensions ahead of the full service being deployed in Islington in June 2018.
- Islington Council would not evict anybody solely for arrears caused by their move to Universal Credit. It was emphasised that it was important for tenants struggling financially to engage with the council at the earliest possible opportunity.
- A member highlighted that he kept his rent account in credit to ensure that he had some security if his circumstances changed and he was unable to pay his rent. It was suggested that this approach could be promoted to tenants. It was also suggested that incentives to pay rent on time may result in a lower level of arrears. The Director of Homes and Communities advised that paying by direct debit was the best way of ensuring that tenants did not fall into arrears.

Housing Scrutiny Committee - 13 March 2018

- Voids performance had decreased over the past year, partly due to an issue with a contractor in the south of the borough. However, significant improvements had been made recently, and the contractor was now achieving 100% of properties returned on time.
- Homelessness was continuing to decrease in Islington, which was attributed to the council's prevention work. The leading causes of homelessness were domestic violence, a change of financial circumstances, and the end of tenancy in the private rented sector. Islington was participating in the Trailblazer project, which sought to prevent homelessness by working with partners such as Jobcentre Plus.
- Although the Homelessness Reduction Act would present operational challenges, it did place a duty on other agencies to refer those at risk of homelessness to the council, and it was hoped that this would enhance the council's homelessness prevention work.
- A member suggested that the number of street homeless and people begging on Upper Street appeared to have increased recently. In response, it was advised that these people were routinely offered help by the council's Outreach Team, and it was known that some individuals were not homeless. A member commented that begging gangs operated in Islington, and it was explained that it was not helpful to give money to these vulnerable people, who may be victims of exploitation.
- Around two thirds of homeless households were families with young children.
- It was suggested that a survey of Partners tenants may be useful to compare satisfaction to performance against KPIs. It was reiterated that some Partners tenants were dissatisfied with the organisation's resident scrutiny arrangements.
- The NRPF Team had experienced an increase in referrals over the past year. A contract had been awarded to Refugee Action to provide support to Syrian refugees.
- The number of severely overcrowded households on the Housing Register had slightly reduced over the past year, however there was still a significant lack of affordable housing in the borough. There were over 18,000 applications on the Housing Register, however only around 1,000 properties became available each year.
- The Executive Member commented on the importance of downsizing as a means of securing larger properties to let to families. The council's new housing developments would also assist in housing those on the Housing Register. The Kings Square development had a dedicated over-55s block, and it was thought that older people may be more willing to downsize into these sort of properties.
- The Committee expressed concern at the sale of housing association properties in the borough, commenting that the loss of nomination rights partially negated the benefits of new affordable housing being developed in the borough. A discussion was had on the negative impacts of Right to Buy legislation.
- The Committee queried why Partners rent arrears were higher than the arrears for directly managed properties. The Executive Member advised that he would take this up with Partners.
- A member of the public highlighted that a local night shelter was distributing free sanitary products to women and suggested that this could be promoted by council services and in public buildings.

The Committee thanked the Executive Member and the Director of Homes and Communities for their attendance.

RESOLVED:

That the progress against key performance indicators and Annual Report be noted.

HOW ISLINGTON COUNCIL WORKS WITH HOUSING ASSOCIATIONS (Item B2)

Karen Lucas, Head of Housing Needs, made a presentation to the Committee on how Islington Council works with housing associations.

The following main points were noted in the discussion:

- Housing associations were a varied group of organisations. Some were large regional or national organisations, whereas others were small local housing providers. For this reason it was difficult to categorise them in general terms. How Islington Council worked with each association varied depending on the type of organisation and their relationship with the council.
- It was highlighted that several large housing associations had merged in recent years. Clarion, formerly Affinity and Circle, managed 125,000 homes. Peabody and Family Mosaic were in the process of merging and managed 55,000 homes across London.
- London's largest housing associations formed the G15 Group, which collectively managed 550,000 homes across London, representing 21% of the housing stock, and housing 1 in 10 Londoners.
- The Housing service focused on building relationships with the housing associations that managed the most amount of homes in the borough. Although it was good practice for local authorities and housing providers to work in partnership across a range of issues, it was explained that there was no legal duty that required housing associations to engage positively with local authorities.
- 32 housing associations operated in Islington managing 16,500 homes. Peabody managed 5,000 homes in Islington, Clarion managed 3,700. Hyde, Newlon and Southern also managed a significant number of properties. Some smaller providers managed fewer than 10 units in the borough.
- Although some housing associations developed a significant number of homes nationally, the number of new housing association developments in Islington had decreased in recent years. It was thought that this was partially because the council was developing available sites in-house through its New Build Programme. However, the council was keen for housing associations to develop affordable housing in the borough, and a breakfast meeting was scheduled for the Executive Member for Housing and Development to meet with the finance leads of major housing associations to challenge them to develop more affordable housing in the borough.
- The council facilitated the Islington Housing Association Group which was chaired by the Chief Executive of Islington and Shoreditch Housing Association. This group met quarterly to discuss local issues, including the impact of welfare reform, anti-social behaviour, and local environmental issues. Islington Council used the group to raise the profile of corporate priorities.
- The Committee considered that further engagement, collaboration, and partnership work with housing associations would lead to more positive outcomes for residents. However, the Committee recognised that this could be challenging when the council and housing associations had competing priorities and different values.
- Members expressed concern that some housing associations did not always respond positively to casework and highlighted several examples of housing associations providing inadequate services to Islington residents.
- It was suggested that a local housing association pledge to adopt the council's early intervention principles would be a positive development.
- The Committee expressed concern that some housing associations acted primarily as commercial developers, rather than social housing providers.

- The Committee suggested that the council could work with neighbouring local authorities to take a united approach to working with housing associations. It was thought that a cross-London approach may result in more meaningful engagement with the larger national housing associations. It was suggested that a London-wide code of practice for housing associations would assist in holding the organisations to account.
- Dr Brian Potter of the Islington Leaseholders Association queried how housing association and local authority property swaps affected the rights of leaseholders. In response, it was advised that there had been few property swaps in the borough, and these tended to be rental properties.
- A member of the public commented that he lived in a housing association property and was dissatisfied that they did not adopt the council's policy on allowing pets in their properties. It was requested that the council raise this issue with housing associations operating in the borough.

The Committee thanked the Head of Housing Needs for her attendance.

362 HOUSING COMMUNICATIONS SCRUTINY REVIEW: FINAL REPORT (Item B3)

RESOLVED:

- (i) That the report of the Housing Communications scrutiny review be agreed;
- (ii) That authority be delegated to the Chair to approve minor amendments to the report, prior to the report being submitted to the Executive.

363 THE COUNCIL'S NEW BUILD PROGRAMME MINI-REVIEW: FINAL REPORT (Item B4)

The Committee agreed that Recommendation 3 be amended to make reference to working with smaller housing associations that have surpluses and are based in the borough.

RESOLVED:

- (i) That the report of the Housing Communications scrutiny review be agreed; subject to an amendment to Recommendation 3 to make reference to working with smaller housing associations that have surpluses and are based in the borough;
- (ii) That authority be delegated to the Chair to approve minor and consequential amendments to the report, prior to the report being submitted to the Executive.

364 VOTE OF THANKS

Members of the Committee thanked the Chair for his service to the Committee over the past year. The Committee also thanked officers, resident observers, and all of those who had contributed to the work of the Committee.

RESOLVED:

That a vote of thanks be accorded to the Chair for the services rendered by him to the Committee during the current municipal year

The meeting ended at 9.30 pm

CHAIR

