

London Borough of Islington

Housing Scrutiny Committee - 29 February 2016

Minutes of the meeting of the Housing Scrutiny Committee held at Committee Room 1, Town Hall, Upper Street, N1 2UD on 29 February 2016 at 7.30 pm.

Present: **Councillors:** O'Sullivan (Chair), Poyser (Vice-Chair), Diner, Erdogan, Hamitouche, Heather and Williamson.

Co-opted members: Rose-Marie McDonald and Jim Rooke.

Councillor Michael O'Sullivan in the Chair

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

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Una O'Halloran and Raphael Andrews.

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

Councillor Gary Heather for Councillor Una O'Halloran.

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

Councillor Mouna Hamitouche declared a personal interest in Items B1 and B3 as a leaseholder of an Islington Council property.

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

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 26 January 2016 be confirmed as a correct record and the Chair be authorised to sign them.

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

The Chair welcomed the residents present to give evidence on responsive repairs.

It was noted that Hyde housing association had been invited to present to the Committee under Item B2, RSL Scrutiny, however was unable to attend and would be invited to a future meeting.

The Chair advised of the intention to hold an additional meeting on Wednesday 23 March to consider witness evidence as part of the Responsive Repairs scrutiny review.

The Committee noted the forthcoming public meeting on the Housing and Planning Bill, to be held Wednesday 8 March 2016. The meeting was primarily intended for council tenants to find out more about proposed changes to social housing. It was also noted that a protest march was due to be held Sunday 13 March at Lincoln's Inn Fields.

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

It was agreed that Item B2, RSL Scrutiny, be deferred to a future meeting.

156 **PUBLIC QUESTIONS (Item A7)**

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

157 **RESPONSIVE REPAIRS: WITNESS EVIDENCE (Item B1)**

The Committee received witness evidence from local residents, including members of the Repairs Reference Group.

The following main points were noted during the discussion:

- The Repairs Reference Group met every two months and worked with the resident engagement team to provide feedback on council services. Residents considered that further work was required to improve the customer experience.
- Whilst residents welcomed the introduction of the online repairs reporting service, it was suggested that this service could be improved. The interface required residents to click on pictures which represented different types of repair, however it was commented that these did not always accurately represent each repair and there was a concern that this could potentially lead to misdiagnosis. There was only a limited scope to provide supplementary written information through the online reporting system.
- Residents considered that reporting repairs through an app would be a useful development.
- Following a question on the quality of repairs, residents suggested that sometimes operatives could appear inexperienced and provide a “quick fix” as opposed to a comprehensive repair. It was emphasised that some operatives were very good; however experiences of the service were varied.
- Residents noted instances of misdiagnosis and consequential problems caused by the narrow specialisms of staff. Examples were provided of inaccurate information on operative PDAs and a metal worker sent to repair a wooden fence.
- It was queried if the residents present had been invited to provide feedback following the completion of a repair to their home. Some residents reported that they had not been given an opportunity to provide feedback, whereas others had been contacted. Residents valued the opportunity to provide feedback, however suggested that this should be sought both immediately after the repair and at a later date to confirm if the repair had been successful.
- Residents noted that problems with damp and condensation were common and a greater emphasis on fixing these issues would be welcomed.
- A resident suggested that the quality of the service could be improved by employing a greater number of chartered surveyors to evaluate defects and repair works.
- A resident reported that one repair to his property had been delayed as it was “lost” in the manual allocation system.
- A resident provided an example of an operative arriving outside of the scheduled time period. A repair was scheduled for between 12-3pm and the operative did not arrive. The resident contacted the service at 4pm to enquire as to their whereabouts and was advised that the service was not able to remotely track operatives. The resident then advised that she would not be home between 5-7pm, however the operative arrived during this time. The Committee considered that such issues should not happen and could be avoided by improving communication between staff and residents.
- It was suggested that the customer journey could be improved by call centre staff being more empathetic to resident concerns. Residents reported that sometimes they felt that their concerns had not been listened to.
- Examples were provided of operatives not displaying identification and arriving at properties with insufficient knowledge of the repair to be carried out.

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- Dr Brian Potter of the Islington Leaseholders Association advised of difficulties faced by leaseholders engaging with the service, including delays and insufficient communication. Leaseholders were only entitled to a limited range of repairs to their property, however sometimes reported repairs required to communal areas and to neighbouring properties; for example a leak in a tenanted flat damaging the ceiling of a leaseholder property. A further example was provided of communal lighting on for 24 hours due to damaged switches. It was welcomed that the repairs service had been brought back in-house, however it was commented that further improvements were required.
- Some residents advised of repairs not being completed to a satisfactory standard. An example was provided of repeated flooding over a period of nine years. A resident suggested that it was not straightforward to escalate complaints and considered that staff could have a poor attitude and lacked empathy.
- One resident worked in a customer service role for Circle Housing and advised that the organisation's repair service faced similar problems to the council's.
- Residents commented on the inconvenience caused by missed appointments and suggested that a text service would be useful. This could advise operatives were on route to a property, their estimated time of arrival, and if they were going to be late.
- A resident advised of a missed appointment due to the operative being called to an emergency repair. It was suggested that the council should have called all affected residents to let them know their repair had been postponed. It was thought that such administrative tasks could help to reduce the number of complaints.
- A leaseholder advised of a blocked drain in a communal area which had caused water damage to her property. This was an annual occurrence and it was queried if this indicated that the repair had not been completed correctly. The leaseholder was not advised when the works were due to be carried out and was unable to inspect if the work had been completed due to restricted access to the communal area. It was suggested that greater communication with tenants and leaseholders about repairs to communal areas was needed.
- It was suggested that the repairs service could evaluate repairs data more frequently to identify problems with properties and feed into the capital programme. The importance of being proactive was emphasised. For example, it was reported that many kitchens and bathrooms previously fitted by a particular Homes for Islington contractor experienced regular boiler problems and blockages due to pipework specifications.
- It was commented that refurbishment and repair works could be better tailored to each property; examples was provided of an inappropriate light fitting being installed which would be hit when an adjacent cupboard door opened, and fire doors in properties which were too heavy for elderly residents.
- Residents reported good experiences of the emergency repairs service. It was reported that an operative was sent to repair an electrical flood within 45 minutes.
- The Committee requested to interview operatives as part of the forthcoming scrutiny visit.
- A resident indicated that operatives declined to complete related jobs when carrying out repairs. An example was provided of an operative unblocking a sink but declining to unblock a toilet at the same time as this had not been reported to the service.
- It was suggested that operatives could take photographs to keep a record of the work carried out.
- Residents suggested that estate managers could be made aware of repairs to assist in identifying trends. It was thought that trends in repairs may indicate design flaws and could identify required capital works. The Committee queried if estate managers could carry out an advocacy role for their estates.

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- It was commented that some TMO tenants were uncertain about which repairs were the responsibility of the TMO and which were the responsibility of the council. An example was given of an instance where neither the council nor the TMO would to take responsibility for a repair.

The Chair thanked all of the residents for their attendance.

158 RSL SCRUTINY (Item B2)

RESOLVED:

That the item be deferred to a future meeting.

159 CAPITAL PROGRAMMING: FINAL REPORT (Item B3)

RESOLVED:

That the final report be agreed and submitted to the Executive.

The meeting ended at 8.45 pm

CHAIR