

London Borough of Islington

Housing Scrutiny Committee - 17 July 2017

Minutes of the meeting of the Housing Scrutiny Committee held at Committee Room 4, Town Hall, Upper Street, N1 2UD on 17 July 2017 at 7.30 pm.

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

Resident Observers: Rose-Marie McDonald and Dean Donaghey

Councillor Michael O'Sullivan in the Chair

281 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Item A1)

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Doolan.

282 DECLARATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (Item A2)

None.

283 DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS (Item A3)

None.

284 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING (Item A4)

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the previous meeting held on 20 June 2017 be confirmed as a correct record and the Chair be authorised to sign them.

285 CHAIR'S REPORT (Item A5)

The Chair welcomed Dean Donaghey, who had been appointed as a resident observer at the 29 June meeting of the Council. The Chair commented that Mr Donaghey had technical expertise in the building trade and would be an asset to the Committee.

286 ORDER OF BUSINESS (Item A6)

No changes were proposed to the order of business.

287 PUBLIC QUESTIONS (Item A7)

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

288 FIRE SAFETY SCRUTINY REVIEW - SID AND WITNESS EVIDENCE (Item B1)

The Committee considered the Scrutiny Initiation Document and received witness evidence from Damian Dempsey, Group Leader – Quantity Surveyors, and Stuart Fuller, Construction, Fire, and Gas Safety Manager.

The following main points were noted in the discussion:

- The council's fire safety works were informed by guidance issued by the Local Government Association following the major fire incidents at Lakanal House in 2009 and Shirley Towers in 2010.
- Fire safety issues were considered regularly by the Homes and Estates Safety Board, which included representation from housing services and the London Fire Brigade. The Board was independently chaired by the Director of Housing Services at Oxford City Council to provide external oversight.
- One major aspect of the fire safety improvement works carried out in recent years was the upgrading of existing entrance doors and the installation of certified fire safe doors to each property. Islington Council was responsible for upgrading the doors to tenanted properties, whereas leaseholders were responsible for fitting such doors to their own properties. Fire safe doors were fitted with a self-closing mechanism which helped to contain fires.
- It was explained that self-closing doors could operate either through self-closing hinges or an overhead device. Doors with self-closing hinges were more aesthetically pleasing than overhead devices, which officers commented could make a property feel 'institutional'. However, the council preferred to install doors with overhead closing devices as they were more effective than self-closing hinges.
- Since the Grenfell Tower fire the council had taken a stronger stance on leaseholders who had not yet installed a self-closing door which complied with regulations. The council was contacting leaseholders advising that they needed to either fit their own door or opt-in to the council's door-fitting scheme within seven days, otherwise the council would seek a court injunction requiring them to fit a compliant door.
- Officers commented that the Grenfell Tower fire would very likely result in regulatory change, and the council would ensure that it was fully compliant with any new regulations or guidance.
- Islington Council had three full time fire safety risk assessors. Each housing block was assessed every three years and its level of fire risk rated as either Tolerable, Moderate, or Substantial. The results of this fire risk assessment fed into the capital programme.
- The council was currently evaluating tenders for the installation of emergency lighting and inter-linked hardwired heat and smoke alarms in street properties and mansion blocks. It was explained that Partners for Improvement in Islington was not responsible for these works as they were outside the scope of the street properties management contract.
- A member queried if fitting inter-linked heat and smoke alarms was sufficient to ensure the safety of residents in street properties and mansion blocks. Officers advised that the alarms would give residents early warning in the event of a fire and would assist in the prompt evacuation of a property. A member suggested that an early warning may not offer a sufficient level of safety to a vulnerable tenant with

mobility issues. Officers commented that these properties were general needs housing and were not built to specifically accommodate disabled and vulnerable people.

- It was commented that Partners' tenants were worried, particularly as Partners' repairs service was managed by Rydon, which had refurbished the Grenfell Tower. It was suggested that Partners' needed to be more responsive to the concerns of residents, particularly as the Partners' resident scrutiny forum was now defunct.
- Officers confirmed that Partners' attended meetings of the Homes and Estates Safety Board.
- A member of the Committee provided an example of fire alarms fitted in street properties which were inaccessible to vulnerable and disabled people due to the height of their ceilings. These alarms could only be tested and deactivated manually by using a broomstick or another aid. It was commented that remote-controlled alarms were available and these would be much more suitable for vulnerable and disabled people. It was commented that this had been reported to Partners but no action had been taken.
- A member of the public queried if the council would be upgrading entry systems on council blocks. Officers were not able to provide specific details of any plans at the meeting. It was commented that the fire brigade was able to override these systems however access to the properties had to be carefully controlled.
- The Committee requested that the Scrutiny Initiation Document be amended to include: (i) a review of the working relationships between the council's Emergency Planning team and Local Authority Liaison Officers, and the London Fire Brigade; (ii) a review of how vulnerable residents are incorporated into evacuation plans and how these plans are stored and accessed in the event of an emergency; (iii) a review of the risks posed by takeaways and hazardous materials being located on the ground floor of blocks of flats; and (iv) a review of tenancy conditions related to the storage and use of barbeques and gas canisters.
- It was suggested that committee members should familiarise themselves with the findings of the Lakanal House Coroner Inquest.
- It was suggested that the London Hazards Centre and Health and Safety Executive could be invited to submit evidence to the review.

The Committee thanked the officers for their attendance.

RESOLVED:

That the Scrutiny Initiation Document be approved; subject to the following additions:

- (i) a review of the working relationships between the council's Emergency Planning team and Local Authority Liaison Officers, and the London Fire Brigade;
- (ii) a review of how vulnerable residents are incorporated into evacuation plans and how these plans are stored and accessed in the event of an emergency;
- (iii) a review of the risks posed by takeaways and hazardous materials being located on the ground floor of blocks of flats; and
- (iv) a review of tenancy conditions related to the storage and use of barbeques and gas canisters.

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF HOUSING SERVICES COMMUNICATIONS SCRUTINY REVIEW - SID AND INTRODUCTION (Item B2)

Lynn Stratton, Deputy Head of Communications and Change, introduced the Scrutiny Initiation Document.

The following main points were noted in the discussion:

- The Housing Service was a large service which had to communicate several different messages to residents. It was important to communicate the right message, to the right people, at the right time.
- The council's resident review groups had previously reviewed communications matters. It was commented that the findings of these reviews could be fed into the committee's review.
- The Committee suggested that agreeing a Code of Communications among the council's housing services, Partners, and contractors would be a method of ensuring that communication with residents was of a consistently high quality.
- The council had been working to develop its online housing services, which included the repairs reporting system. The council's website had also been redesigned in 2016 and it now met high standards of accessibility.
- It was suggested that witness evidence could take the form of joint workshops with officers to review complaints, and receiving feedback from focus groups or resident forums.
- A member commented that residents often assigned greater importance to printed communications as opposed to emails, and acknowledged the council's work to develop and improve online services. It was asked if there were any services which would not be appropriate or effective to provide online. Officers noted that no decision had been taken on if particular services could not be provided online, but it was decided that some key information should be available in hard copy. For example, recent communications relating to fire safety following the Grenfell Tower fire had been printed and delivered to each property due to its importance. It was suggested that websites were particularly useful in signposting to other services.
- A member commented that although it was possible to report anti-social behaviour online, there was no feedback system to communicate what was being done in response to these reports.
- The digital notice boards installed on estates had been well received, and it was thought that these could be developed further by including more localised content. It was suggested that residents' associations could be consulted on the information they wanted these screens to display.
- The Committee queried how repairs reported online were processed, and if this resulted in a quicker response than reporting via telephone.
- A member commented that housing services were unlikely to receive feedback from residents who could not speak English, and asked how the council knew that its housing services were accessible to all. In response it was advised that the council did make a number of publications available in multiple languages, and telephone translation services were available on request. A member suggested that many residents did not know that translation services were available.
- A review by the resident Service Review Group found that if one person in a household could speak English they would often translate for their families. This usually involved younger people translating for their parents.
- It was requested that the findings of relevant reviews carried out by resident scrutiny groups be circulated to the Committee.
- The Committee requested that the Scrutiny Initiation Document be amended to specify that the review should focus on verbal, written and online communication, as

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well as communication between officers, communication with residents, communication between departments, and communication with tenant and resident associations.

- A member of the public suggested that residents needed methods to communicate with the housing service in a collective way, as 'atomised' forms of communication did not highlight wider issues.
- A member of the public asked if the review would focus on how councillors communicated with residents. In response it was advised that the review was focused on Housing Service communications.
- The Committee requested an organisation chart which indicated lines of communication within the council and with residents. It was requested that this include front line staff, including caretakers.
- A member of the Committee highlighted that issues were sometimes escalated to councillors if there was not an effective resolution, and councillors could get frustrated by the same issues occurring repeatedly. It was suggested that a detailed evaluation of resident journeys through services could help to identify issues which need resolving.

The Committee thanked Lynn Stratton for her attendance.

RESOLVED:

That the Scrutiny Initiation Document be approved, subject to amendments to specify that the review would consider: verbal, written and online communication, communication between officers, communication with residents, communication between departments, and communication with tenant and resident associations.

290 REVIEW OF WORK PROGRAMME (Item B3)

The Committee indicated that an additional meeting may be required to consider how the council works with Housing Associations.

The meeting ended at 8.30 pm

CHAIR