

**Housing Scrutiny Committee - 4 September 2017**

Minutes of the meeting of the Housing Scrutiny Committee held at Committee Room 1, Town Hall, Upper Street, N1 2UD on 4 September 2017 at 7.30 pm.

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

**Resident Observers:**   Rose-Marie McDonald and Dean Donaghey

**Councillor Michael O'Sullivan in the Chair**

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

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

The Committee passed on their best wishes to Councillor Gary Doolan, who was absent due to illness.

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

Councillor Poyser for Councillor Spall.

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

None.

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

**RESOLVED:**

That the minutes of the previous meeting held on 17 July 2017 be confirmed as a correct record and the Chair be authorised to sign them.

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

The Chair noted that Paul Hobbs, the London Fire Brigade Borough Commander, had submitted apologies for the meeting. Mr Hobbs had been asked to provide evidence as part of the Fire Safety scrutiny review, and had been invited to attend the October or November meeting.

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

No changes were proposed to the order of business.

**297**      **PUBLIC QUESTIONS (Item A7)**

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

A member of the public queried the fire safety of solar panels, expressing concern about panels on her roof; and also highlighted that the windows on her council-owned property were in a poor condition, querying if they met the Decent Homes Standard. In response, it was advised that solar panels presented a low fire risk and any problems would likely be caused by more general electrical safety issues. The Committee asked officers to take up these issues outside of the meeting and report back to the Chair.

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

Damian Dempsey, Group Leader – Quantity Surveyors, and Stuart Fuller, Construction, Fire, and Gas Safety Manager, answered questions on the evidence circulated with the agenda.

The following main points were noted in the discussion:

- The Committee noted that housing officers had been under considerable pressure since the Grenfell Tower fire and thanked them for work.
- In response to a question, officers thought that interim findings on the causes of the Grenfell Tower fire would be available by the end of the calendar year.
- A member reported that a number of residents were still using barbeques on their balconies despite a letter from the council warning against this. It was suggested that stronger communication and action from the council was needed.
- The Committee considered the fire risks posed by faulty electrical appliances, and if the council would PAT test residents' appliances if they were suspected of being unsafe. In response, officers advised that this was not a service offered by the council. Residents were the owners of the electrical appliances in their property and it was their responsibility to ensure that they were safe to use. Officers queried the role of the council if an appliance failed the PAT test; it was not clear if the council would have the authority to disable the appliance by removing the plug, or what action could be taken if the resident chose to continue to use the faulty appliance. If the appliance was disabled by the council, it was not clear who would be responsible for removing the appliance and sourcing a replacement. It was noted that there were on average 40 electrical appliances in each household.
- Members queried the fire risks associated with houses of multiple occupation in the private rented sector. Whilst it was known that some HMO properties were of a low standard, it was acknowledged that Environmental Health had a licensing and inspection regime which was intended to identify such issues. It was commented that the council had recently been very successful in prosecuting HMO landlords that did not comply with safety standards, and further details would be submitted to a future committee meeting.
- A member advised of a vulnerable resident with mental health issues. The resident was a known hoarder and had been asked to remove a number of items stored on her balcony. It was understood that the resident had received correspondence about the fire risks associated with hoarding, however it was suggested that the resident

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did not have the capacity to understand these risks and remove the items herself. It was queried if there was support available for residents with such issues. In response, the Executive Member for Housing and Development advised that the resident may be eligible for support and agreed to take this case up with officers.

- Officers advised that the council had sufficient capital resources to ensure that its properties complied with current fire safety regulations. However, if regulations were to change and additional works were required, then additional capital investment would be required.
- The Committee asked officers if they considered current fire regulations to be adequate. In response, it was advised that they thought they were adequate, however the findings of the Grenfell Tower inquiry may highlight inadequacies.
- The Committee commented on the different fire safety regulatory regimes internationally, noting that tower blocks in New York City were required to have external fire escapes.
- A member queried if leaseholders were required to have insurance which would indemnify the owners and tenants of neighbouring properties against any damage caused to their property or possessions through fire or flood. Officers believed that having insurance was a condition of the lease, however advised that they would seek confirmation from the relevant officers.
- Following a question, it was advised that Housing officers met with the Fire Brigade in various capacities approximately once a week. The Fire Brigade also held familiarisation meetings in larger blocks so they were aware of their structure and access routes. The Fire Brigade carried out 'post fire visits' jointly with housing officers to evaluate the causes and impact of fires in council properties, and occasionally carried out joint inspections with Housing officers if there was a specific fire safety concern.
- Some parking bays in the borough had been removed to ensure that the emergency services had adequate access to buildings.
- It was queried if the council had evacuation plans for housing blocks, and if these were shared with the Fire Brigade. In response, it was advised that the housing service did not maintain evacuation plans as mass evacuation was not encouraged or expected. It was reiterated that the fire safety advice for larger blocks was to stay put unless the fire is directly affecting you. In such circumstances, residents were expected to self-evacuate.
- It was queried if the council had details of vulnerable and disabled residents who may be unable to evacuate in a fire, and if this information was shared with the Fire Brigade. In response, it was advised that information on vulnerable residents was held and had previously been provided to the Fire Brigade, however the Fire Brigade had commented that this was too much information. Officers suggested that the Fire Brigade was primarily concerned with the location of fire hazards, such as residents with oxygen canisters for medical purposes.
- The Housing Service had previously considered installing local information boxes in larger blocks to enable the emergency services to access information on resident vulnerabilities, however it was decided not to take this up due to concerns over data protection and how the information would be kept up to date. The Committee suggested that an electronic solution could hold this data in a secure and practical way for the fire service, and proposed that an app could be developed for this purpose.
- Concern was expressed that some vulnerable people could be heating their homes through portable gas appliances fuelled by canisters, as some people believed that these were cheaper than central heating.
- The Committee was addressed by a wheelchair user who lived in a council housing block. She commented that she was unable to escape her property in the event of a fire. Her plan was to escape to the balcony, and although her neighbours had helped

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to clear access, her door needed adjusting for her to access the balcony. She commented that these issues had been raised with the housing service however had not been followed up, and expressed concern that the Fire Brigade may be unaware of her specific needs. Officers advised that these issues would be taken up outside of the meeting.

- Dr Brian Potter, Chair of the Islington Leaseholders Association, advised that leaseholders were required to pay towards an insurance policy held by the council, however this only insured leaseholders up to the rebuild value of their property, and not the full value of their mortgage. It was queried if leaseholders were able to take out an insurance policy to a higher value, as it was understood that homeowners were not able to insure their property with two insurers. In response, officers advised that their understanding was that insurers only ever insured to the rebuild value of properties, however this would be raised with the council's Insurance Team and officers would contact Dr Potter to confirm the council's position.
- Dr Brian Potter, Chair of the Islington Leaseholders Association, queried the ownership of the front door frame to leasehold properties. Dr Potter's understanding was that the council owned the door frame and the leaseholder owned the door; however, following recent correspondence to leaseholders on the requirement to install a fire-safe door, Dr Potter had been advised that both the door and the frame were the responsibility of the leaseholder. Officers advised that their understanding was that the door and frame were the responsibility of the leaseholder, and they would confirm the position and respond to Dr Potter. Dr Potter asked that the council's legal advice on this matter be made public, however officers advised that leaseholders should seek their own independent legal advice on matters relating to the enforcement of lease conditions.
- The Committee noted that building regulations did not apply retrospectively. It was commented that if any changes to building regulations were made following the Grenfell Tower inquiry, then these would not be applicable to existing properties.
- It was required that a briefing note be circulated to members on changes to the landlord regulations to be introduced in April 2018.

The Committee thanked the officers for their attendance.

The Committee noted the revised Scrutiny Initiation Document and Witness Evidence Plan.

### **299 HOUSING COMMUNICATIONS SCRUTINY REVIEW: WITNESS EVIDENCE (Item B2)**

#### **a) Evidence from the Communications Team**

The Committee received a presentation from Lynn Stratton, Deputy Head of Communications and Change, which provided introductory information on communication channels, resident priorities, and document accessibility. This supported the evidence circulated in the agenda pack.

The following main points were noted in the discussion:

- The Committee considered the infographic detailing how the housing service communicated with residents and external partners. It was noted that residents received a mixture of localised, targeted, and broadcast communications.
- The housing service had worked to develop its digital communications in recent years, including online systems for repairs and housing options.
- Social media presented opportunities to offer more localised communications, perhaps on an estate basis.

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- At present the service did not make use of SMS communications on a regular basis, but it was thought that this could be a useful tool in future.
- The Communications section did not routinely review housing communications as a form of quality control, however major communications were developed in partnership between Housing and Communications.
- Resident feedback on housing communications had previously highlighted the need for simplicity and a more empathetic tone.
- Training on letter writing and customer service was available for staff. This was provided by the Corporate Learning and Development Team. The Communications team made guidance available to staff through the intranet.
- The Committee welcomed that communications guidance was available, but queried if the contents of this guidance was well known by staff. Officers advised that the take up of this guidance was not evaluated. The Committee suggested that key messages about local issues and events were not always communicated effectively.
- Customer service training was compulsory for staff in certain front-facing areas, but not for all housing staff.
- Language translation services were available on request. It was preferential to translate verbally rather than in writing, as this allowed any questions to be answered immediately.
- The Committee noted the Islington Council Brand Guidelines, and that they contained standards for accessibility.
- Members suggested that residents may find regularly updated FAQs helpful. Officers commented that these would also be useful to the Communications section.
- Officers advised that there was no plan to introduce chat bots at present, although commented that these would be useful for residents.
- The Committee considered the reach of online communications. Whilst some residents did not have regular access to the internet, others only wanted to communicate online.
- Members commented that they had received housing casework which highlighted a lack of coordination, respect and empathy in communications from council staff. Officers acknowledged that this could be a problem, and commented that it was particularly difficult to monitor verbal communication between staff and residents.
- The Housing Operations section was reviewing its ways of working, with the aim of being more responsive to the welfare needs of residents.
- The Committee expressed concern that some vulnerable people did not have regular access to the internet to access online services. Officers advised that the council's Digital Champion Scheme supported residents to get online, and indicated that further information would be provided to a future meeting.
- A member commented that she worked as a translator for residents and remarked that the tone and attitude of council staff was sometimes poor, and this could have a detrimental effect on vulnerable people. It was suggested that front-line staff should receive compulsory training on tone of voice and empathy.
- The Committee suggested that staff awareness of communication guidelines could be assessed through the appraisal process.
- The Committee suggested that some level of communications training should be mandatory for all staff.
- Members of the public commented on the importance of written communication, as this ensured that residents and the council had a paper trail for reference.

The Committee thanked Lynn Stratton for her attendance.

### b) Evidence from Property Services on complaints management

The Committee received a presentation from Lorenzo Heaune, Productivity and Compliance Group Leader, on how Property Services handles and learns from complaints.

The following main points were noted in the discussion:

- The Property Services Customer Services Team received and investigated complaints and member enquiries. These were responded to in line with council procedures and Ombudsman guidance.
- It was commented that there had been some confusion following the 'Customer Excellence' team being renamed the 'Customer Services' team, as there was also a separate, council-wide Customer Services team.
- All staff in the Property Services Customer Services Team were required to attend customer services training.
- The number of complaints had decreased in recent years. The most frequent complaints were related to protracted repair works and issues not being resolved, which demonstrated the importance of achieving a 'first time fix'.
- Customer satisfaction was independently evaluated by Kwest. This sometimes identified issues which required follow-up action, and such issues were dealt with promptly. Any negative feedback that did not require action was evaluated on a monthly basis.
- Following a question, it was advised that Partners had their own complaints processes, however did consult with the council on customer service issues from time to time. It was suggested that Partners should be required to mirror the council's own processes, and report their performance to the Housing Scrutiny Committee on a quarterly basis, as the council's housing services do. The Executive Member for Housing and Development advised that he was meeting with Partners every six weeks and would ask them about further engagement with the Housing Scrutiny Committee.
- It was suggested that all staff should have an objective in their appraisal related to providing high-quality customer services, and this should be regularly reviewed in one-to-one meetings with management.
- Officers understood that property repairs was a highly emotive area. It was commented that staff do care about residents' experiences, and perhaps this point needed to be emphasised more.
- Following a question, it was advised that staff turnover in the Customer Services Team was fairly steady, although there were two posts which were currently filled temporarily whilst permanent staff were sought. Although working in the team could be challenging, staff reported that they felt motivated and committed in their role.
- Officers understood that residents could get frustrated, but abusive behaviour towards staff was not tolerated. It was advised that staff were offered emotional support through the Employee Assistance Programme.
- Following a question, it was advised that residents were able to log a complaint about their repair up to 12 months after the completion date; however this was not an absolute deadline.
- Following a question related to lifts repeatedly needing maintenance work, it was confirmed that officers investigated patterns in repairs and any assets which repeatedly failed were reviewed thoroughly. It was commented that the new repairs management system would make it easier to identify trends in repairs.
- Dr Brian Potter, Chair of the Islington Leaseholders Association, commented that leaseholders should not be required to contribute towards the cost of repairs

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required due to vandalism, as this should be covered through the council's insurance.

- Dr Brian Potter, Chair of the Islington Leaseholders Association, commented that leaseholders should not be charged for the cost of incomplete repairs, for example the cost of when a repairs operative is unable to carry out a repair as they did not have the correct information or equipment.
- It was commented that the council should use the terms 'tenant' and 'leaseholder' and not 'customer'.

The Committee thanked Lorenzo Heaune for his attendance.

### c) Scrutiny Initiation Document and Witness Evidence Plan

The Committee agreed to amend the scrutiny initiation document, to include the 'organisational culture relating to communications' within the scope of the review.

#### **RESOLVED:**

That the scrutiny initiation document be amended, to include the 'organisational culture relating to communications' within the scope of the review.

**300**

### **QUARTERLY REVIEW OF HOUSING PERFORMANCE (Q1 2017/18) (Item B3)**

Councillor Diarmaid Ward, Executive Member for Housing and Development, introduced the quarterly performance report.

The following main points were noted in the discussion:

- No new affordable homes had been completed in quarter one. This was partially due to delays in completing electricity and mains water connections. It was still expected that the target of 200 new affordable homes by 2020 would be met.
- The number of tenants in under-occupied properties downsizing was significantly below target. The Executive Member commented on the importance of using the council's housing stock efficiently. It was suggested that some tenants were discouraged from moving as they were concerned about losing their secure tenancy under proposals previously announced through the Housing and Planning Act. The Committee commented that greater work was needed to explain that this was not the case.
- The Committee suggested that increasing the number of downsizers should be a top priority of the housing service, and that downsizing communications should be targeted at middle-aged couples whose children had left home. The Committee noted that it may not be beneficial for some older and vulnerable people to downsize, as the stress of downsizing could have a detrimental effect on their wellbeing.
- It was advised that there were services to assist tenants with moving home, including furniture removal, but there was a lack of awareness of these services and they needed to be promoted further.
- It was the council's downsizing policy was that nobody should pay more rent for a smaller property. Dr Brian Potter, Chair of the Islington Leaseholders Association, queried this, commenting that his understanding was that the rent was only held at a lower rate for one year. The Executive Member reiterated the council's policy and commented that he was not aware of anyone who was paying more rent as a result

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of downsizing. It was advised that any instances of tenants paying more rent as a result of downsizing should be reported to the Executive Member to investigate further.

- It was reported that the new repairs system had been implemented largely successfully. It was positive that the first time fix rate was only 1% below target given the significant changes, however it was expected that this would improve over time, and it was suggested that a more challenging target may be appropriate.
- The Executive Member attributed the reduction in homelessness to cross-borough prevention work. It was commented that the Homelessness Reduction Act had well-meaning aims, however additional resources were required to meet the new duties under the Act. The Executive Member considered that the £48 million allocated to local authorities to meet their duties under the Act was insufficient.
- Islington Council currently had its lowest number of households in nightly-booked temporary accommodation since September 1998.
- The leading cause of homelessness was loss of private sector tenancy. It was commented that assured shorthold tenancies were not a secure form of tenancy and the private rented sector needed reform.
- The Executive Member explained that homeless households must be vulnerable and have a local connection to be eligible for housing from Islington Council. 'Local connection' meant living in Islington for three of the past five years.
- It was commented that shared ownership housing was not 'affordable', particularly in the south of the borough. The Executive Member believed that it was important to have intermediate housing options available, but also had concerns about the affordability of shared housing.
- The Committee considered the 'Housing First' model used in Finland, where vulnerable homeless people are given a permanent home quickly, rather than temporary accommodation. It was commented that this enabled a more effective focus on substance abuse and other issues.
- Following a question from a member of the public, it was advised that the St Mungo's Outreach Service regularly engaged with people who were street homeless, however any concerns about homeless people should be reported to [streetlink.co.uk](http://streetlink.co.uk).

The Committee thanked Councillor Ward for his attendance.

### **RESOLVED:**

That that progress against key performance indicators in Quarter 1 2017/18 be noted.

The meeting ended at 9.50 pm

### **CHAIR**