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**AGENDA FOR THE HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

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Members of the Housing Scrutiny Committee are summoned to Committee Room 1, Town Hall, Upper Street, N1 2UD on **13 March 2018 at 7.30 pm.**

**Lesley Seary**  
**Chief Executive**

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Despatched : 5 March 2018

Membership

Councillor Michael O'Sullivan (Chair)  
Councillor Marian Spall (Vice-Chair)  
Councillor Alex Diner  
Councillor Gary Doolan  
Councillor Aysegul Erdogan  
Councillor Troy Gallagher  
Councillor Osh Gantly  
Councillor Mouna Hamitouche MBE

Rose Marie McDonald (Resident Observer)  
Dean Donaghey (Resident Observer)

Substitute Members

Councillor Satnam Gill OBE  
Councillor Gary Heather  
Councillor Jenny Kay  
Councillor Una O'Halloran  
Councillor Olly Parker  
Councillor Angela Picknell  
Councillor Dave Poyser  
Councillor Nurullah Turan

**Quorum: is 4 Councillors**



## A. Formal Matters

Page

1. Apologies for Absence
2. Declaration of Substitute Members
3. Declarations of Interests

If you have a **Disclosable Pecuniary Interest\*** in an item of business:

- if it is not yet on the council's register, you **must** declare both the existence and details of it at the start of the meeting or when it becomes apparent;
- you may **choose** to declare a Disclosable Pecuniary Interest that is already in the register in the interests of openness and transparency.

In both the above cases, you **must** leave the room without participating in discussion of the item.

If you have a **personal** interest in an item of business **and** you intend to speak or vote on the item you **must** declare both the existence and details of it at the start of the meeting or when it becomes apparent but you **may** participate in the discussion and vote on the item.

**\*(a) Employment, etc** - Any employment, office, trade, profession or vocation carried on for profit or gain.

**(b) Sponsorship** - Any payment or other financial benefit in respect of your expenses in carrying out duties as a member, or of your election; including from a trade union.

**(c) Contracts** - Any current contract for goods, services or works, between you or your partner (or a body in which one of you has a beneficial interest) and the council.

**(d) Land** - Any beneficial interest in land which is within the council's area.

**(e) Licences**- Any licence to occupy land in the council's area for a month or longer.

**(f) Corporate tenancies** - Any tenancy between the council and a body in which you or your partner have a beneficial interest.

**(g) Securities** - Any beneficial interest in securities of a body which has a place of business or land in the council's area, if the total nominal value of the securities exceeds £25,000 or one hundredth of the total issued share capital of that body or of any one class of its issued share capital.

This applies to **all** members present at the meeting.

4. Minutes of Previous Meetings

1 - 12

To agree the minutes of the previous meetings held on:

- 30 January 2018
- 6 February 2018

5. Chair's Report
6. Order of Business

7. Public Questions

**B. Items for Decision/Discussion**

- |    |   |              |
|----|---|--------------|
| 1. | Quarterly Review of Housing Performance (Q3 2017/18) and Annual Executive Member Presentation | TO FOLLOW    |
| 2. | How Islington Council works with Housing Associations   | PRESENTATION |
| 3. | Housing Communications Scrutiny Review: Final Report  | 13 - 34      |
| 4. | The Council's New Build Programme Mini-Review: Final Report                                   | 35 - 46      |

**C. Urgent non-exempt items (if any)**

Any non- exempt items which the Chair agrees should be considered urgent by reason of special circumstances. The reasons for urgency will be agreed by the Chair and recorded in the minutes.

**D. Exclusion of press and public**

To consider whether, in view of the nature of the remaining items on the agenda, any of them are likely to involve the disclosure of exempt or confidential information within the terms of the Access to Information Procedure Rules in the Constitution and, if so, whether to exclude the press and public during discussion thereof.

**E. Confidential/exempt items**

**F. Urgent exempt items (if any)**

Any exempt items which the Chair agrees should be considered urgently by reason of special circumstances. The reasons for urgency will be agreed by the Chair and recorded in the minutes.

The next meeting of the Housing Scrutiny Committee will be on 25 June 2018

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London Borough of Islington

## Housing Scrutiny Committee - 30 January 2018

Minutes of the meeting of the Housing Scrutiny Committee held at Committee Room 4, Town Hall, Upper Street, N1 2UD on 30 January 2018 at 7.30 pm.

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

**Resident Observer:**   Dean Donaghey

**Also Present:**       **Councillor:**               Diarmaid Ward

### Councillor Michael O'Sullivan in the Chair

#### **334        APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Item A1)**

Apologies for absence were received from Rose-Marie McDonald and Councillors Doolan and Erdogan.

#### **335        DECLARATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (Item A2)**

None.

#### **336        DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS (Item A3)**

None.

#### **337        MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING (Item A4)**

##### **RESOLVED:**

That the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 11 December 2017 be confirmed as a correct record and the Chair be authorised to sign them.

#### **338        CHAIR'S REPORT (Item A5)**

The Chair noted that the Grenfell Inquiry was ongoing and the Housing Scrutiny Committee would consider relevant matters from the Inquiry as they arose.

The Chair noted that the Department for Communities and Local Government had been renamed the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and commented on the challenges facing the Ministry, including the need for tenants to be better represented at a national level through the establishment of a tenants' voice organisation.

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

The Chair advised that Item B2, The Council's New Build Programme Mini-Review, would be considered before Item B1, Housing Association Scrutiny.

**340**      **PUBLIC QUESTIONS (Item A7)**

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

**341**      **THE COUNCIL'S NEW BUILD PROGRAMME MINI-REVIEW: WITNESS EVIDENCE AND CONCLUSIONS (Item B2)**

a) Presentation on Camden's New Build Programme

The Committee received a presentation from Kate Cornwall-Jones and Steve Beard, officers of the London Borough of Camden, on Camden's New Build Programme.

The following main points were noted in the discussion:

- Camden's New Build Scheme was described as a 'Community Investment Programme'. The scheme delivered community improvements alongside social housing, and had invested over £1 billion in the borough through HRA and government funding.
- Camden's scheme worked in a similar way to Islington's, in that the council developed a proportion of private housing for general sale, which subsidised the development of social housing and community investments.
- Camden's scheme focused on small sites which private developers may not consider viable propositions. This allowed the borough to maximise the amount of new housing being delivered.
- Camden's scheme had delivered 870 new units, with a further 2,000 planned. Over 500 of those delivered were for social rent.
- Camden Council's planning policies required 50% affordable housing, which was typically split into 60% social rent and 40% intermediate housing. However, this was subject to viability.
- Camden sought to address housing inequality through its new build scheme, and had established 'Camden Living', which provided affordable rental properties for key workers and those on middle incomes. Camden did not prioritise shared ownership as due to London property prices this option was not affordable to those on low and middle incomes.
- Camden had developed studio accommodation as a means of alleviating homelessness.
- Camden Council had doubled the density of the Agar Grove estate by redeveloping the majority of the estate. Although there had initially been opposition to the proposals, the scheme was now progressing with the support of residents. The first phase of properties to be developed would be 100% social housing, and the final scheme would have over 50% social housing.
- Camden was developing properties to high environmental standards. Some properties did not have radiators and were instead built to the Passivhaus standard, in which homes were highly insulated and heated through the circulation of air. This had environmental benefits and would also help to alleviate fuel poverty. It was advised that this system was very efficient and Camden Council had received

## Housing Scrutiny Committee - 30 January 2018

comments from some residents that their properties were too warm, rather than too cold.

- The Committee was supportive of developing homes to the Passivhaus standard. Camden officers commented that passivhaus homes were very efficient and suggested that the standard should be used more widely.
- Camden officers emphasised the importance of community engagement. Camden had employed local residents to provide peer to peer engagement on new housing schemes. These residents had a strong presence on the estate and were well placed to engage with the local community.
- Camden's properties were designed according to the London Design Guide, with some aspects exceeding those standards.
- Camden built homes to the lifetime homes standard, 10% of properties were wheelchair adaptable.
- Camden did not 'pepper pot' social and private housing. It was commented that one 52-unit scheme was a mixed social and private development, however this had been problematic as social and private tenants had different expectations. For example, private tenants expected a concierge service and high quality finishes, which would not be viable if provided in social housing. Although Camden developed mixed social and private blocks, the social and private elements were generally separated by floors or stairwells with different entrances. Camden officers emphasised the importance of the entrances looking the same.
- Following the evacuation of the Chalcots Estate, Camden Council had appointed a director of resident safety. Camden was reviewing the safety of all of its housing stock, reviewing the materials used in new build developments, and was making changes as appropriate.
- Camden was now designing properties above standards set out in building regulations as regulatory changes were anticipated.
- The most significant challenge to Camden's new build scheme was the cost of development. Costs had increased following the EU referendum and it was expected that costs would increase further after Brexit. Sales values had also plateaued since the referendum. The 1% annual rent reduction and HRA borrowing cap were also limiting the finances available to the scheme.
- Following changing social attitudes to redevelopment, Camden was now taking a more cautious approach to the demolition of properties.
- Camden was lobbying for permission to combine right to buy receipts with GLA grant monies to fund the delivery of new housing. At present this was not permitted by the government.
- Following a question on community engagement, it was advised that Camden residents had previously raised a variety of objections to new council housing developments. These included the loss of open space, the loss of employment space, or an insufficient amount of new affordable housing. Camden had since made scheme-specific commitments on new developments to address local concerns, for example that there would not be an overall loss of green space, or no overall loss of units. However, it was commented that sometimes it was not possible to achieve the target of 50% affordable housing on every scheme if it was also intended for the scheme to fund a major community investment. For example, it was not always viable to provide 50% affordable housing if a new school was also to be financed through the sale of private housing through the scheme.
- Camden officers commented that the key to community engagement was transparency and working collaboratively with the local community. It was important to consult all stakeholders, not only those who were the most vocal.
- Camden had a local lettings policy and new units were allocated to those in the local area first.

## Housing Scrutiny Committee - 30 January 2018

- New council housing developments were subject to right to buy; however, Camden had lost few of their new units through right to buy.
- Camden's definition of "affordable" housing was social rent levels. Camden operated a rent cap dependent on bedroom levels; social rent on a one-bedroom property was approximately £110 a week, exclusive of service charges.
- It was clarified that local authorities only received approximately 30% of funds from right to buy sales and this funding could not be combined with other forms of 'public subsidy', such as GLA grant funding, to develop new housing. The Committee asked if Camden Council was campaigning with other local authorities to relax restrictions related to right to buy funding and the HRA borrowing cap. In response it was suggested that a sector-wide joined up approach may yield better results, however officers were not optimistic about the government agreeing to significant changes.
- The Committee noted concerns about private housing contributing to the gentrification of estates. It was noted that the average sale value of Camden's new build properties was around £650,000.
- The Committee considered environmental aspects of new build housing. Some Camden houses and schools made use of rainwater recycling for flushing toilets.
- The Committee commented on the importance of building key worker housing, and suggested that the development of new schools could be tied to the development of new housing for teachers.
- Following a question from a member of the public, it was commented that Camden had carried out major refurbishment of some estates affected by damp, but this work was not carried out by the new build team. Significant work to reduce damp would likely be carried out alongside other major refurbishment work, such as the replacement of windows and heating systems.
- Following a question from a member of the public, Camden officers advised that there was no clear evidence that separating social and private units by doorway was affecting community cohesion. Although new developments were built with different internal finishes, all were built to a high standard.
- Following a question from a member of the public, it was advised that residents relocated as a result of the HS2 rail development did not have to pay any rent increase unless they had moved to a bigger property. It was commented that Islington had a similar relocation policy.

The Committee thanked Kate Cornwall-Jones and Steve Beard for their attendance.

### b) Briefing note on information requested at the previous meeting

The Committee raised concerns that the process through which housing associations bid for development sites artificially inflated the cost of schemes and therefore decreased the viability of social housing. A member commented that if the council was to significantly increase the amount of affordable housing developed in the borough, then a joined up and strategic approach to working with Housing Associations was required. It was suggested that robust conversations about housing association ambitions and aspirations was needed.

It was considered vital for new developments to deliver as much affordable housing as possible. It was suggested that local planning authorities should have greater powers to control the development of affordable housing.

### c) Conclusions of the Mini-Review

It was agreed that the Chair would consider conclusions of the review and report them to the next meeting for agreement.



**342 HOUSING ASSOCIATION SCRUTINY - THE GUINNESS PARTNERSHIP (Item B1)**

The Committee received a presentation from Nahide Cook, Regional Manager, and Jon Milburn, Group Development Director, on Guinness' work as a landlord in the borough.

The following main points were noted in the discussion:

- The Guinness Partnership managed 633 properties in Islington. Following the Grenfell Tower fire, flats on Hungerford Road and Percival Street had been found to have flammable cladding, and as a result the organisation was working closely with the council's Emergency Planning team. Guinness commented on the importance of being honest with residents and communicating risks to them regularly. Vulnerable residents had been offered person centred fire safety assessments, and escape routes were checked daily. Fire wardens were on site 24 hours a day and carried out observations every 15 minutes. The organisation had carried out repairs to all fire doors in the blocks, regardless of tenure. Fire alarms at Hungerford Road had also been linked to The Bridge School, which was located below the flats. Details of vulnerable residents were located in a locked fire-proof safe which the Fire Brigade could access in an emergency.
- There had been relatively few cases of anti-social behaviour associated with Guinness properties in the borough.
- Guinness believed that there was further scope for more joint working with Islington Council, particularly in helping to minimise litter and fly tipping around Guinness properties.
- It was commented that Guinness was keen to develop social housing in the borough, however was concerned by the seemingly slow planning process in Islington. It was commented that Guinness had received planning permission for 500 houses in Milton Keynes within six months, however a 25 unit scheme in Islington had taken 30 months so far and had still not received approval. The scheme would deliver 9 social rented units and three shared ownership units, as well as nursery space. It was suggested that such delays influenced the organisation's investment decisions.
- Resident satisfaction was behind target; however data was only available at a national level. The level of resident satisfaction was comparable to many other national housing associations, and Guinness recognised that there was work to be done to improve services for tenants.
- Five Guinness properties had been let in Islington over the past year; two had been allocated to those on the Council housing register, three had been let via internal transfer.
- Guinness processed voids in 16 days, significantly below the 27.5-day target.
- Arrears in Islington were slightly higher than expected, 3.65% as opposed to the 3.5% target. Arrears had increased since the introduction of universal credit and welfare reform.
- All Islington properties had received a gas safety check in the previous year.
- Guinness let properties at affordable rents, which was a maximum of 65% of market rental value.
- Nationally, Guinness completed 84.2% of repairs on time. Guinness considered this to be satisfactory. Repairs were completed by one contractor in London. A new contractor had been appointed last year, and although there had been some initial performance issues, indicators suggested that the service was improving. It was explained that the organisation had an in-house provider in the North and South of England and it was hoped that this in-house service could be offered in London in future.

## Housing Scrutiny Committee - 30 January 2018

- Guinness achieved a surplus of £96million in the previous year, however it was commented that this was an extraordinary year in which Guinness' finances were boosted by property sales in London and Brighton. Guinness had budgeted for a surplus of £53million in 2017/18, however this would not be achieved as around £6million had been spent on fire safety improvements. In 2018/19 the organisation would seek to achieve a 30% operating surplus, which was comparable to other national housing associations. Following a question from the Committee, it was emphasised that this surplus was re-invested back into providing housing services.
- The Committee expressed concern that Guinness did not pay the London living wage.
- Investment in Guinness properties was prioritised in accordance with safety, stock condition, and resident feedback. The organisation spent £70million on maintenance each year.
- The organisation had not sold any properties in Islington in recent years. Although there were no immediate plans to sell properties in Islington, this could not be ruled out.
- Arrears had increased following the introduction of welfare reform, and around 20% of tenants on universal credit were now in arrears. The organisation was targeting communications at affected residents, and had not yet evicted any tenants as a result of those arrears. The organisation was also helping residents to apply for relevant benefits and a hardship fund was available in certain circumstances.
- The Committee expressed concern that 20% of universal credit tenants being in arrears was not sustainable. A member suggested that the organisation should guarantee that it will not evict any tenants if they are in hardship as a result of welfare reform, and suggested that further work with local authorities may provide vulnerable people with more targeted support. Guinness had revised its business plan to account for higher debt levels.
- It was commented that many Guinness residents in arrears were not in receipt of all of the benefits they were entitled to, and the organisation was therefore pro-actively contacting residents to signpost them to local services. It was emphasised that Guinness was keen to work with residents experiencing financial hardship; staff had worked overtime to provide advice to residents on evenings and weekends.
- A member commented that local ward councillors had been in contact with residents at Percival Street who were worried about fire safety. It was commented that the performance information provided did not correlate to the experiences of residents, and there was problematic damp and mould in some Guinness' properties. The Guinness representatives advised that the damp and mould issues would be investigated further.
- A member commented that Guinness rental levels were comparatively higher than Islington Council properties, and classifying 65% of market rate as affordable was roughly double the target rent level for the borough. Guinness agreed that classifying 80% of market rate as "affordable" was not appropriate for London, and clarified that the rental level of some schemes was less than 65%; the organisation was developing housing in Brixton which would be rented for around 50% of market rent. It was commented that the organisation tried to keep rental levels within the Local Housing Allowance cap.
- Following a question, it was commented that data on vulnerable residents was compiled from self-referrals and referrals from relevant agencies. The organisation did not have the resources to assess the needs of every resident, however referrals were made to relevant support organisations as appropriate.

## Housing Scrutiny Committee - 30 January 2018

- A member of the public asked if Guinness would publish fire risk assessments for all of its properties, as Islington Council had. In response, it was advised that this was not possible as Guinness managed 66,000 properties nationwide.

The Committee thanked Nahide Cook and Jon Milburn for their attendance.

### **343 HOUSING COMMUNICATIONS SCRUTINY REVIEW: DRAFT RECOMMENDATIONS (Item B3)**

Members commented that Housing Communications was a broad topic and the Committee may wish to further review communication matters in future.

#### **RESOLVED:**

That the draft recommendations be approved.

### **344 FIRE SAFETY SCRUTINY REVIEW: FINAL REPORT (Item B4)**

The Committee noted concerns about the fire safety of roofs raised in the housing press, and commented that the council should keep this matter under review. It was agreed to add a paragraph to the scrutiny report to this effect.

#### **RESOLVED:**

That the report be agreed and submitted to the Executive, subject to an additional paragraph on the fire safety of roofs.

### **345 WORK PROGRAMME (Item B5)**

The Committee noted that an additional meeting to scrutinise the performance of Partners for Improvement in Islington would be held on 6<sup>th</sup> February 2018.

The meeting ended at 9.30 pm

**CHAIR**

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**Housing Scrutiny Committee - 6 February 2018**

Minutes of the meeting of the Housing Scrutiny Committee held at Committee Room 4, Town Hall, Upper Street, N1 2UD - Islington Town Hall on 6 February 2018 at 7.30 pm.

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

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

**Also present:**   **Councillor:**           Diarmaid Ward

**Councillor Marian Spall in the Chair**

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

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Gary Doolan. Apologies for lateness were received from Councillor Mick O'Sullivan.

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

None.

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

None.

**349     CHAIR'S REPORT (Item A4)**

None.

**350     ORDER OF BUSINESS (Item A5)**

No changes were proposed to the order of business.

**351     PUBLIC QUESTIONS (Item A6)**

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

**352     SCRUTINY OF PARTNERS FOR IMPROVEMENT IN ISLINGTON (Item B1)**

The Committee received a presentation from Tom Irvine, Interim Managing Director, John Venning, Asset Manager, and Doug Pope, Head of Housing, on the performance of Partners for Improvement in Islington.

The following main points were noted in the discussion:

- Partners had carried out a survey of councillors to establish why member perceptions of Partners service differed from the organisation's performance

## Housing Scrutiny Committee - 6 February 2018

indicators. 11 responses had been provided which highlighted common themes and Partners had planned a number of actions as a result.

- Members had identified communication issues related to complex repairs. Partners acknowledged that the organisation could do better in this regard and would be reviewing its protocol.
- Members had identified performance issues with cyclical maintenance and decoration. Partners was to monitor this closely and continue to hold consultation and information events with residents about cyclical works.
- Members had suggested that Partners management did not engage with residents. The Interim Managing Director advised that he would personally telephone a sample of residents every month to hear their views directly.
- Members had commented that some Partners staff did not have an appropriate attitude when working with residents. It was advised that Partners would produce a briefing for all councillors on their staff performance management processes.
- Members had commented that Partners had inadequate complaints handling processes. In response, Partners had introduced a regular quality audit exercise. Management was also regularly reviewing a proportion of complaints to ensure that any learning was being embedded.
- Members had commented that Partners did not sufficiently meet the needs of vulnerable residents. As a result Partners had been invited to monthly Housing and Adult Social Services management team meetings to promote greater strategic join-up.
- Members highlighted that Partners did not appropriately address anti-social behaviour issues. In response, all ASB officers were undertaking training, and members were invited to raise any ASB issues directly with those officers.
- Members considered that there was not sufficient officer support for responding to member enquiries. Work was underway to address this by providing support to the Communications and Complaints Manager.
- Members had expressed dissatisfaction with Partners' approach to communication with councillors. In response, Partners had sought to adopt a new approach characterised by humility. The organisation would avoid presenting strong performance results, and would instead focus on the challenges the organisation faced.
- The Head of Housing demonstrated the complexity of cases considered by Partners by providing a case study of a vulnerable resident who was causing noise nuisance and anti-social behaviour. Partners explained how they worked with the Council, the Police, and made referrals to mental health and substance misuse support services. Members expressed dissatisfaction with the case study; commenting that they received similar casework on a regular basis, that the response of Partners was an expected level of service, and not exceptional.
- A member expressed concern that Partners seemed to characterise certain vulnerable people as 'perpetrators' of anti-social behaviour. Partners officers apologised for their choice of words.
- The Committee considered a briefing note written by a Partners tenant on the organisation's resident scrutiny arrangements. Partners representatives explained that the organisation had revised its resident scrutiny arrangements, and had transitioned from a closed forum to an open forum which was more reflective of the council's approach. Members of the previous forum were not satisfied with this approach and considered that the open forum did not adequately scrutinise Partners' performance. However, Partners officers contested that they had received positive feedback on the new scrutiny format, and the open format had helped to resolve property access issues, and improve other operational matters.
- The Committee considered the principles of Partners' asset management strategy. Properties were maintained to a contractual standard, similar to the decent homes

## Housing Scrutiny Committee - 6 February 2018

standard. Partners was required to maintain the value of housing stock on behalf of Islington Council.

- Properties managed under the PF11 contract, which expired in 2033, would undergo a programme of external redecoration commencing in 2019. This would include works to roofs, windows and joinery. A major kitchen replacement programme would take place between 2023 and 2028 to ensure that no kitchen was over 20 years old. Boilers were replaced every 12 years.
- The PF12 contract was due to expire in 2022. Cyclical decoration would end in 2020, however repairs would continue to be carried out as required. As the contract entered its final years, Partners would work with the council to ensure a smooth handback process, this would include joint stock condition surveys.
- Partners commented that the Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation and Liability for Housing Standards) Bill 2017 may result in a higher number of repair requests related to health and safety issues. It was commented that fitness standards were already incorporated into the PFI contracts, however Partners' legal officers were reviewing the content of the Bill. Following a question, it was commented that insulation may need to be installed in some properties if warmth is to be a condition of fitness.
- A member suggested that Partners should be seeking to improve properties, as opposed to maintaining them. It was also suggested that some Partners cyclical works had used inexpensive and poor quality components. In response, it was advised that properties were maintained to the contractual standard, which had improved the properties since the contract started.
- A member queried Partners' most recent performance indicators. In response, it was advised that all indicators were above contractual targets and were monitored on a monthly, quarterly, or annual basis. A member suggested that contractual standards agreed in the early 2000s may no longer be appropriate in 2018.
- It was commented that the Committee had not previously found Partners performance data to be credible, and it was asked if performance indicators had been revised to provide a more accurate representation of performance. In response, it was advised that indicators were specified in Partners' contracts with the Council, however there was a recognition that there were alternative ways to measure performance other than contractual indicators.
- The Committee asked if Partners disagreed with any comments made through the councillor survey. In response, it was advised that Partners did not consider all comments made to be fair, and it was difficult to respond to very general criticisms.
- A member commented that he did not receive an invitation to take part in the survey; in response Partners officers advised that they would be pleased to receive detailed feedback on their services.
- It was suggested that resident feedback on repairs should not be gathered by repairs operatives, and residents should have the opportunity to reflect on completed repairs before providing feedback. Members provided examples of poor quality repairs in Partners properties.
- Following a question, it was advised that Partners did seek to classify casework as either complex or non-complex, but officers recognised that this was not always straightforward. Complex cases were reviewed by the senior management team.
- It was expected that Partners would appoint a permanent managing director within the next six months.
- A member of the public highlighted significant and ongoing repairs issues with her Partners property. These included multiple leaks which had not been rectified; as a result carpet could not be fitted without it being ruined. The kitchen was also in a poor condition and the property was so cold that the heating had to be on constantly. The resident had two very young children with specific health needs. The resident commented that that she was facing fuel poverty and found Partners

## Housing Scrutiny Committee - 6 February 2018

staff to be unhelpful. The issue was to be raised with the Housing Ombudsman. Partners officers apologised and agreed to look into the issue.

- A member of the public commented that Partners had a poor reputation among residents. In response it was advised that the organisation was seeking to engage with residents and address their problems.
- Dr Brian Potter of the Islington Leaseholders Association invited Partners officers to attend the April meeting of the Association and discuss the organisation's performance with leaseholders. Dr Potter suggested that performance indicators should be set and assessed by an independent organisation.
- Following a question, Partners clarified that relevant communications to residents did include email addresses and telephone numbers of Partners officers.
- A member of the public asked if the council had made financial deductions under the PFI contracts as a result of performance issues. In response it was advised that deductions had been applied on occasion, however these could be offset if Partners performed above target against other performance indicators. It was suggested that the council and Partners should be more transparent in regards to when and why deductions have been applied.
- Members of the public raised a number of ongoing repairs issues and complaints.
- In response to a question, it was advised that not all Partners surveyors were chartered surveyors. This was in line with industry standards for clerk of works roles.
- A member of the public commented on the need for tenants and leaseholders to have a stronger voice and hold their landlords to account, particularly following the lack of resident engagement in relation to the Grenfell Tower fire. The Committee considered the merits of organised resident scrutiny arrangements, noting that all housing providers should be open and transparent when engaging with their residents.
- It was suggested that Partners management should spend time working alongside frontline staff, as this may help to illustrate and identify performance issues.
- A member suggested that Partners could make greater use of digital communication with residents, such as text messaging and email.
- The Committee noted that Partners had organised community activities, including a Christmas party for older residents, and a cinema club.

The Committee thanked the Partners officers for their attendance.

The meeting ended at 9.20 pm

**CHAIR**





# **The Effectiveness of Housing Service Communications**

## **DRAFT REPORT OF THE HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

London Borough of Islington  
March 2018

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### The Effectiveness of Housing Service Communications

#### **Aim:**

To review the effectiveness of Housing Service communications

#### **Evidence:**

The Committee commenced the review in September 2017. Evidence was received from the following sources:

##### Evidence from council officers:

- Lynn Stratton, Deputy Head of Communication and Change
- Lorenzo Heanue, Group Leader – Productivity and Compliance
- Matt West, Head of Repairs and Maintenance
- Jo Murphy, Service Director – Homes and Communities
- Christine Short, Head of Capital Programming

##### Evidence from Partner organisations:

- Tom Irvine, Interim Managing Director, Partners for Improvement in Islington

##### Focus Groups:

- Focus group with local residents
- Focus group with council staff

##### Documentary Evidence:

- Report: Background information on Housing Communications
- Infographic: Overview of communications channels and audiences for housing
- Table of main housing communications channels
- Website usage statistics
- Findings of the Service Review Group: Learning from and responding to complaints
- Islington Council Brand Handbook
- Report: Online Housing Services (repairs reporting system)

#### **Main Findings:**

The Committee welcomed the communications guidance produced by the corporate Communications team, as well as the range of training courses available. However, the Committee noted that housing service communications did not always meet the council's agreed standards.

The Committee considered complaints management processes. The majority of housing complaints were related to repairs and issues not being resolved to the satisfaction of residents. The Committee considers that more robust quality monitoring processes are required to achieve consistently good quality and joined up communication with residents across housing services. It is suggested that greater management involvement in reviewing communications, complaint responses and customer journeys would be beneficial.

The Committee suggests that a regularly updated 'Frequently Asked Questions' section on the council's website would be beneficial to officers, residents, and councillors; this would help to resolve the most common enquiries and assist with directing queries to relevant services.

Residents identified that they would like to receive feedback on the issues they reported, such as estate environmental issues and communal repairs. Residents also expressed frustration with a lack of progress on delayed and complex repairs. It was acknowledged that some processes are lengthy and involve several different teams, however legitimate delays and processes may appear as inaction to residents if they are not provided with regular updates.

Residents suggested that they should be allocated a named case officer when raising repairs, complaints, nuisances, and other matters. It was commented that residents preferred to speak to the same officer and build a relationship with them, rather than deal with a different officer each time.

The Committee considered the importance of joined up working, and supporting staff to communicate with residents effectively. The Committee was impressed with the service ambassador scheme, noting that it had the potential to significantly develop communication between services and improve joined up working at an operational level. The Committee would support the scheme expanding to other areas of the housing service and key partner services such as Adult Social Care.

The Committee was impressed with the online repairs reporting system, and would support further promotion of the system given its effectiveness and potential for financial savings. The Committee also considered that there is scope for further improvements. The Committee would support the development of further online housing services, however, it is also acknowledged that some housing services are not appropriate to migrate entirely online.

The Committee welcomes the transformation work in the Homes and Communities service. The redesigned service will have a stronger emphasis on early intervention, empowerment, resilience and prevention. The Committee would welcome an update after the service redesign is fully implemented.

### **Conclusions:**

The Committee has made 19 recommendations in response to the evidence received. These relate to the quality of communications, communicating the right information to residents, supporting staff and joined up working, and other aspects of housing service communications. It is hoped that these recommendations will assist housing services in providing good services on a tight budget.

The Committee recognises the importance of Housing Communications and may wish to continue to review communications-related matters in future.

The Committee would like to thank the officers who provided evidence to the review. The officers interviewed said that they were motivated to provide a good service to residents and were frustrated when things did not go well. Although the review has partially focused on service failures and complaints, the Committee also suggests that services should promote the positive work they are doing on behalf of residents; when the council provides a good service this should be recognised and communicated. The Committee would also like to thank the residents who contributed to the review by providing relevant casework and their views on housing services. The Executive is asked to endorse the Committee's recommendations.

## **Recommendations:**

### Quality of Communications

1. The council should agree a Code of Communications among the council's Housing services, Partners for Improvement in Islington, and contractors. This should set out agreed principles for effective communication, and should seek to ensure consistent quality in communication with residents. The Code should cover issues such as responsiveness, accessibility, tone of voice, joined up working and record keeping. Tenant Management Organisations and Housing Associations should be encouraged to adopt a similar code, if they have not done so already.
2. Processes for Housing management to review the quality of staff communications, complaint responses and customer journeys should be enhanced. Communications and complaints should be reviewed on a regular basis, with clear procedures for how quality will be monitored, how these can be escalated for management review, and how this will inform officer training and development and internal processes.
3. All front-facing housing staff should have an objective in their appraisal related to providing high quality customer services and communication. Progress against this objective should be regularly reviewed in one-to-one meetings with management.

### Communicating the right information to residents

4. Digital notice boards on estates should be developed further to include more localised content. It is suggested that residents' associations and other groups be consulted on the information these notice boards should display.
5. A 'Frequently Asked Questions' section should be added to the Housing section of the council's website. This would help to signpost residents and officers to relevant information and answer the most common queries. It is thought that this would free-up staff time for other issues.
6. Housing services should seek to provide better feedback to residents on issues they report, including estate environmental issues and communal repairs. This could include more direct communication with residents, or "you said, we did" style communications.
7. Housing services should keep residents informed of progress with delayed and complex repairs, and explain any relevant processes and the reasons for delays. The Repairs service should schedule reminders on case files for officers to provide regular updates to residents with unresolved repairs.
8. Housing services should consider the feasibility of allocating named case officers to deal with complex issues. This would ensure consistency in communication and reassure residents that their issue is being dealt with. These officers should be empowered to liaise with other services to secure the best outcome for residents.
9. It is recommended that a booklet is produced after each capital works scheme detailing the works carried out with before and after images and the cost of the scheme. This booklet should be provided to both tenants and leaseholders, and should be available in a range of formats.

10. The mechanism for officers to report out of date information on the council's website should be promoted further in internal communications.

#### Supporting staff and joined up working

11. The council should use internal communications to raise awareness of communications guidance and relevant training courses. Service managers should encourage their staff to make use of the guidance and training available.
12. The Housing Service Ambassadors should have a key role in encouraging joined up working. It is recommended that the Service Ambassadors scheme be extended to include representatives of all Housing services, and other key services that work in partnership with Housing, such as Adult Social Care.
13. To encourage joined-up working and improve services for residents, staff workshops should be held which focus on how best to resolve specific and complex issues. These workshops should include representation from all relevant housing services and partners, and should consider how internal processes and working arrangements can be improved to ensure the best possible outcome for residents. This would assist in particularly complex matters such as damp and condensation, the repairs access procedure, anti-social behaviour, and other matters that require a coordinated response.
14. Housing services should review their use of CRM, the council's customer record management system. Wider use of the system would assist officers in communicating with residents and assist officers in providing joined up services. It is suggested that interaction with other key systems, such as the repairs management system, would be beneficial.
15. Caretakers and other front line staff should be empowered to report and follow up issues on behalf of residents.

#### Developing online services

16. The online repairs reporting system should be promoted further to encourage greater usage. It is suggested that the system could be developed further by incorporating the reporting of communal repairs.

#### Other service developments

17. The Committee welcomes that the Housing Operations service has been redesigned as a Homes and Communities service. The Committee requests that an update be submitted to the Committee in 12 months' time on progress in transforming the service.
18. Better use should be made of mailings to residents, such as the annual rent statement. For example, the reverse side of letters could include information and advice on property maintenance, tenancy management, or promotion of early intervention services. The council should also review the key contact information circulated with the rent statement, as residents commented that they were unsure which teams to contact about different issues.
19. The council should produce a structure chart for housing services detailing key officers and the responsibilities of different teams. This would assist officers and councillors in directing their queries.

## MEMBERSHIP OF THE HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 2017/18

### **Councillors:**

Councillor Mick O’Sullivan (Chair)  
Councillor Marian Spall (Vice-Chair)  
Councillor Alex Diner  
Councillor Gary Doolan  
Councillor Aysegul Erdogan  
Councillor Troy Gallagher  
Councillor Osh Gantly  
Councillor Mouna Hamitouche MBE

### **Resident Observers:**

Rose Marie McDonald  
Dean Donaghey

### **Substitutes:**

Councillor Satnam Gill OBE  
Councillor Gary Heather  
Councillor Jenny Kay  
Councillor Una O’Halloran  
Councillor Olly Parker  
Councillor Angela Picknell  
Councillor Dave Poyser  
Councillor Nurullah Turan

### **Acknowledgements:**

*The Committee would like to thank all the witnesses who gave evidence to the review.*

### **Officer Support:**

*Stephen Nash – New Homes and Development Manager.  
Jonathan Moore – Senior Democratic Services Officer*

## 1. Introduction

- 1.1 The review commenced in September 2017. The overall aim of the review the effectiveness of Housing Service communications.

The Committee also agreed the following objectives:

- To review the effectiveness of verbal, online and written communication channels; with residents, tenant and resident associations, and internally.
  - To assess if internal processes and staff training are sufficient to achieve effective communication with residents.
  - To review how Housing Services respond to and learn from feedback and complaints.
  - To evaluate the take-up of new electronic communication methods used by the Council's Housing Services, if these have been successfully implemented, and plans for any further 'channel shift'.
  - To review how the council can be assured that the council's contractors and their subcontractors are communicating with residents effectively.
  - To identify areas of good practice and how housing communications could be improved.
- 1.2 In carrying out the review the Committee met with council officers from housing services and the corporate communications team, as well as front line staff and residents in order to get a balanced view.

### Local context

- 1.3 Communications channels used by the council's housing services include printed publications such as the quarterly IslingtonLife magazine, the council's website and social media, targeted mailings, consultations, community events, estate notice boards, telephone communication, email correspondence and face to face communication with council officers. There are also internal communications channels for council staff and members, including the intranet and weekly and monthly staff email bulletins.
- 1.4 Islington's Corporate Plan 2015-19 identifies 'providing residents with good services on a tight budget' as a priority. The Corporate Plan also sets out the council's underpinning principles, which include providing people-centred services, rather than systems or process led approaches; and 'making every contact count' to avoid people having to negotiate their way through complex systems.

## 2. Findings

### Quality of Communications

- 2.1 The Committee reviewed the guidance available to staff on how to communicate effectively with residents. Evidence from the corporate Communications team set out the principles that all services should adhere to in their communications: written communication should be simple, clear, and easy to read; communications should provide the right level of detail for the audience; communications should follow the council's brand guidelines; and information should be timely and effectively coordinated.
- 2.2 The Committee welcomed Islington Council's brand guidelines, which were produced by the corporate Communications section. These contained guidance on writing style and the use of plain English, accessibility standards, providing contact details, and commissioning translation

services. This guidance, as well as factsheets on a variety of communications issues, was available from the council's Intranet.

- 2.3 The council's corporate Learning and Development team provided a range of training courses for staff. These included: Make Every Contact Count, on signposting residents to support services; Courageous Conversations, on difficult workplace conversations; Influencing and Persuading; Customer Care Excellence, which covered active listening, body language, and handling conflict; and Write First Time, which focused on written skills and covered structure, tone of voice, grammar, vocabulary and plain English. The Communications team also held themed workshops from time to time; a workshop was recently held on tone of voice and 'nudge' theory.
- 2.4 Major communications such as mail-outs, consultations and website pages were produced jointly by Housing and Communications officers. Communications officers had also worked with housing services to develop their communications; this included drafting template letters and other documents. However, it is not feasible for Communications to oversee the production of all communications produced by housing services.
- 2.5 The Committee welcomed the guidance and training available to staff, noting that it provided comprehensive advice on how to communicate effectively. However, the Committee noted that housing service communications did not always meet the council's agreed standards. Members commented that they had received housing casework which highlighted a lack of coordination, respect and empathy in communications from council staff. A member commented that she worked as a translator for residents and remarked that the tone and attitude of staff was sometimes poor, and this could have a detrimental effect on vulnerable people. The Committee also commented that key messages about housing issues and events were not always communicated effectively. These concerns were reflected in evidence received from residents. Officers advised that resident feedback on housing communications had previously highlighted the need for simplicity and a more empathetic tone.
- 2.6 Although a range of guidance is available to council staff, the Committee expressed concern that council contractors, and their sub-contractors, are not required to follow council communication guidelines. Members also noted inconsistencies between the council's communication standards and those of key partner organisations, including Partners for Improvement in Islington, housing associations, and tenant management organisations. Whilst the Committee recognises that the council only has limited influence over these organisations, a more consistent approach to communication with residents would be welcome. The Committee suggests that a Code of Communication should be established for the council's housing services. This would draw on the council's corporate communications guidance and clearly set out service specific standards on a range of communications and customer service issues.
- 2.7 **It is recommended that the council should agree a Code of Communications among the council's Housing services, Partners for Improvement in Islington, and contractors. This should set out agreed principles for effective communication, and should seek to ensure consistent quality in communication with residents. The Code should cover issues such as responsiveness, accessibility, tone of voice, joined up working and record keeping. Tenant Management Organisations and Housing Associations should be encouraged to adopt a similar code, if they have not done so already.**
- 2.8 The Committee considered complaints management processes. Housing Property Services had its own Customer Service Team which was responsible for investigating complaints and member enquiries in relation to responsive repairs, gas servicing, and mechanical and engineering



matters. The majority of housing complaints were related to repairs and issues not being resolved to the satisfaction of residents.

- 2.9 Officers understood that property repairs was a highly emotive area and staff needed to handle repairs issues sensitively. The residents providing evidence to the review commented that most members of staff were polite and helpful. However, the Committee received some evidence from residents that communications on their repair issues had not been satisfactory, and in particular it was commented that sometimes staff could be more sympathetic to residents' issues. One resident reported that officers had put the phone down on him several times when reporting a repair; another resident provided email correspondence in which she repeatedly asked for an update on her repair, a leak into her flat from a neighbouring property, however no substantial update was provided from July to October 2017. Officers acknowledged that there can be examples of poor service from time to time, and explained that repairs satisfaction was independently monitored by Kwest. It was commented that the number of upheld complaints had reduced in recent years.
- 2.10 The Committee considered how Property Services learn from complaints about inadequate or late repairs. The Customer Services Team record service failures and pass them to the resident liaison manager, who investigates the matter with the relevant service manager. The service manager will agree to actions, and these are then reviewed at a bi-monthly meeting between the Customer Services Team Manager, the Resident Liaison Manager, and relevant service managers and group leaders.
- 2.11 The Committee values the work of the Customer Service Team in processing resident complaints, and appreciates that this work can be challenging and emotionally demanding. However, the Committee considers that more robust quality monitoring processes are required to achieve consistently good quality and joined up communication with residents across housing services. Although senior officers are consulted before major communications are published, it is suggested that greater management involvement in reviewing communications, complaint responses and customer journeys would be beneficial. This would help to identify and resolve process issues which may contribute to poor customer service and communication, particularly in relation to significant service failures, and complex issues which require input from multiple services.
- 2.12 It is important that any changes to management oversight of communication and customer service are clearly communicated to front line staff, with details of how quality will be monitored and how issues will be escalated for management review. The findings of management reviews should be reported to relevant services and corporate Learning and Development as appropriate, to enable any learning to be incorporated into training and internal processes.
- 2.13 **It is recommended that processes for Housing management to review the quality of staff communications, complaint responses and customer journeys should be enhanced. Communications and complaints should be reviewed on a regular basis, with clear procedures for how quality will be monitored, how these can be escalated for management review, and how this will inform officer training and development and internal processes.**
- 2.14 The Committee queried if the content of communications guidance was well known by staff. In response, Communications officers advised that the take up of this guidance was not regularly evaluated. The Committee suggests that awareness of communication guidelines could be assessed through the appraisal process. It is also suggested that all front-facing housing staff

should be appraised on their customer service and communication skills. It is important that staff receive regular feedback on their performance, and that management review their team's performance in this area.

**2.15 It is recommended that all front-facing housing staff should have an objective in their appraisal related to providing high quality customer services and communication. Progress against this objective should be regularly reviewed in one-to-one meetings with management.**

2.16 The Committee also considered the quality of communications from Partners for Improvement in Islington. Partners tenants received a regular newsletter five times a year, as well as direct mailings on topical issues such as fire safety. All staff received the council's 'Make Every Contact Count' training, and had revised some communications, such as their leaseholder FAQs, following feedback from residents. Ensuring good communication was one of Partners' priorities for 2017/18.

2.17 The Committee considered Partners' internal performance data on communications and commented that this did not provide an accurate representation of the organisation's performance. The Committee held an additional meeting in February 2018 to consider Partners overall performance in more detail.

#### Communicating the right information to residents

2.18 The Committee considered the content of housing service communications. It is important that communications are both of a high quality and communicate relevant and useful information to residents.

2.19 The residents who participated in the committee's focus group welcomed the introduction of digital notice boards on estates. The Committee suggests that these could be developed further by including more localised content. For example, information about local community events and public meetings, details of estate maintenance works, and other targeted communications relevant to the estate.

2.20 To ensure that communications are relevant to local people, it is suggested that local residents are consulted on the types of information they would like the digital notice boards to display. The council could consult with residents associations, community organisations, local youth groups, and others.

**2.21 Digital notice boards on estates should be developed further to include more localised content. It is suggested that residents' associations and other groups be consulted on the information these notice boards should display.**

2.22 Members and officers identified that they regularly received queries for the same information. Although it was acknowledged that there is a great deal of information on the council's website, it was reported that both officers and residents could find the website difficult to navigate. The Committee suggests that a regularly updated 'Frequently Asked Questions' section would be beneficial to officers, residents, and councillors; this would help to resolve the most common enquiries and assist with directing queries to relevant services.

**2.23 A 'Frequently Asked Questions' section should be added to the Housing section of the council's website. This would help to signpost residents and officers to relevant**

**information and answer the most common queries. It is thought that this would free-up staff time for other issues.**

- 2.24 Residents identified that they would like to receive feedback on the issues they reported, such as estate environmental issues and communal repairs. Although residents were satisfied that these issues were being resolved once reported to the council, it was commented that receiving feedback would remove any doubt in regards to if issues were being progressed or had been completed. It is also thought that receiving positive feedback may encourage residents to report issues again in future. This feedback could be on a one-to-one basis, such as an email or text message, or could be posted on a notice board or other prominent location if the issue has been raised by a number of residents.
- 2.25 **Housing services should seek to provide better feedback to residents on issues they report, including estate environmental issues and communal repairs. This could include more direct communication with residents, or “you said, we did” style communications.**
- 2.26 Residents expressed frustration with a lack of progress on delayed and complex repairs. Some residents said they did not know if their repair was being progressed or not, or when it might be resolved. Some residents said that they felt exasperated, and were considering giving up on pursuing their repairs issue, even when it related to a significant issue such as a leak into their property. The Committee was concerned that some residents, particularly the most vulnerable, may not feel confident in pursuing repairs issues, and this could result in their repair not being resolved.
- 2.27 The Committee raised these concerns with officers. In response, it was explained that some processes are lengthy and involve several different teams. For example, the Repairs Access Procedure had to be followed when it was necessary to access a property to complete a repair that was causing damage to a neighbouring property. A common example of this was a leak from a property above dripping into a property below. Officers explained that this was not a straightforward issue; only the courts could grant the council entry into a property without the tenant or leaseholder’s permission. The council had to demonstrate that it had repeatedly tried to contact the tenant or leaseholder without response. This was a lengthy process which required liaison between Property Services, Legal Services, third parties, and the courts. The Committee acknowledged that due process had to be followed, however legitimate delays and processes may appear as inaction to residents if they are not made aware of processes and are not provided with regular updates. Residents commented that they would value courtesy calls, and not having to chase issues themselves.
- 2.28 **It is recommended that housing services should keep residents informed of progress with delayed and complex repairs, and explain any relevant processes and the reasons for delays. The Repairs service should schedule reminders on case files for officers to provide regular updates to residents with unresolved repairs.**
- 2.29 Residents suggested that they should be allocated a named case officer when raising repairs, complaints, nuisances, and other matters. It was commented that residents preferred to speak to the same officer and build a relationship with them, rather than deal with a different officer each time. Residents also voiced their frustration with having to repeat themselves by explaining their issue to several different officers. The Committee appreciates that case management systems should allow any officer to access all details about a particular issue, however, this may not be possible if an issue requires cross-service collaboration, and may not capture all relevant details.

- 2.30 **Housing services should consider the feasibility of allocating named case officers to deal with complex issues. This would ensure consistency in communication and reassure residents that their issue is being dealt with. These officers should be empowered to liaise with other services to secure the best outcome for residents.**
- 2.31 The Committee considered examples of communications issued prior to capital works schemes commencing. Members thought that the booklets produced by the council were of good quality and provided helpful information. The Committee suggests that a follow up booklet should be produced after the works are completed with 'before and after' photographs and details of the cost of the scheme. This would be particularly useful to leaseholders for record keeping purposes, and would help to communicate the quality of work being carried out through the capital programme.
- 2.32 **It is recommended that a booklet is produced after each capital works scheme detailing the works carried out with before and after images and the cost of the scheme. This booklet should be provided to both tenants and leaseholders, and should be available in a range of formats.**
- 2.33 Front-line officers expressed frustration with out of date information on the council's website, commenting that this sometimes led residents to have inaccurate expectations of council services. It was suggested that there should be more robust mechanisms for officers to report any inaccuracies or other issues they have. Communications officers advised that website inaccuracies may be raised by completing the form under the 'Was this information helpful?' tab on the council's website, or by emailing the Online Services Team. The Committee suggests that these mechanisms should be promoted further in internal communications, and that officers are encouraged to report out of date or inaccurate information.
- 2.34 **It is recommended that the mechanism for officers to report out of date information on the council's website should be promoted further in internal communications.**

#### Supporting staff and joined up working

- 2.35 The Committee considered the importance of joined up working, and supporting staff to communicate with residents effectively. Residents identified joined-up working between different services as a priority, commenting that it was frustrating to be given conflicting information from different officers, and having to repeat yourself to different teams. It was also commented that join-up between Housing and Adult Social Services was very important for vulnerable tenants, and these residents needed a consistent approach from the council.
- 2.36 The range of communications-related guidance and training is set out elsewhere in this report. Although some communications-related training courses are mandatory for front-facing housing staff, this varies from service to service. However, as many communications-related training courses are open to all staff, the Committee would support the further promotion of training and guidance in internal communications.
- 2.37 **The council should use internal communications to raise awareness of communications guidance and relevant training courses. Service managers should encourage their staff to make use of the guidance and training available.**

- 2.38 A number of staff members interviewed by the Committee had recently been appointed as 'service ambassadors'. This was a new scheme implemented in the Homes and Communities service to build links between service areas, and to work together to improve services for residents. The ambassador role was voluntary and it was intended to have an ambassador from each relevant service area. The ambassadors had signed up to a charter which set out the values of service ambassadors: this included that homes and communities promote a sense of belonging and wellbeing, that early intervention helps to prevent problems and create better chances for residents, and that ambassadors would work to create better opportunities for residents.
- 2.39 The Committee was impressed with the service ambassador scheme, noting that it had the potential to significantly develop communication between services and improve joined up working at an operational level. The Committee would support the scheme expanding to other areas of the housing service and key partner services such as Adult Social Care. This would help to encourage joined up working beyond housing services, and may further improve services for residents.
- 2.40 **The Housing Service Ambassadors should have a key role in encouraging joined up working. It is recommended that the Service Ambassadors scheme be extended to include representatives of all Housing services, and other key services that work in partnership with Housing, such as Adult Social Care.**
- 2.41 The Committee discussed how services could work closer together with the service ambassadors. The ambassadors suggested that the council could hold staff workshops focused around specific complex issues and have staff from all relevant services attend. This would help to clarify the responsibilities of all officers involved, and the processes that should be followed to ensure a coordinated response. This may result in new solutions to complex issues, and overcome common barriers.
- 2.42 Issues such as damp and condensation, the repairs access procedure, and anti-social behaviour often require input from several different teams. It is thought that an issue-specific focus on joined-up working will help to achieve more effective person-centred services.
- 2.43 **To encourage joined-up working and improve services for residents, staff workshops should be held which focus on how best to resolve specific and complex issues. These workshops should include representation from all relevant housing services and partners, and should consider how internal processes and working arrangements can be improved to ensure the best possible outcome for residents. This would assist in particularly complex matters such as damp and condensation, the repairs access procedure, anti-social behaviour, and other matters that require a coordinated response.**
- 2.44 Officers were aware that residents can be frustrated by having to repeat the same information to different officers. Some officers suggested that this could be improved through an expanded use of CRM, the council's customer record management system. The system allows officers to access information on residents and properties and service requests associated with them. It was acknowledged that the system had limitations, for example it did not integrate with the repairs management system, however it was thought that greater use of the system would assist in joined-up working between services.
- 2.45 **Housing services should review their use of CRM, the council's customer record management system. Wider use of the system would assist officers in communicating**

**with residents and assist officers in providing joined up services. It is suggested that interaction with other key systems, such as the repairs management system, would be beneficial.**

- 2.46 The Committee noted the key role that caretakers and other front line staff have in communicating with residents. These staff meet with residents on a daily basis and have a good knowledge of their patch and the issues that matter to local people. The Committee would support front line staff being empowered to report and follow up issues on behalf of residents, particularly the most vulnerable.
- 2.47 **Caretakers and other front line staff should be empowered to report and follow up issues on behalf of residents.**

#### Developing online services

- 2.48 The Committee received evidence on online housing services, in particular the online repairs reporting system. The online repairs system was not intended to replace traditional routes of reporting repairs, but was intended to supplement the existing service. It was thought that reporting repairs online would be preferable to some residents, and the system had the potential to generate savings as it needed significantly less officer resource in comparison to the telephone service. The online repairs reporting system was fully integrated with the repairs management system and did not need officers to input information.
- 2.49 The Committee received a demonstration of the online repairs reporting system. The system was designed to be user friendly and operated on a pictogram basis, which was intended to overcome language barriers and knowledge gaps. The system was fully functional on mobile phones and allowed residents to report non-urgent repairs 24 hours a day, as opposed to the 8am to 8pm telephone service offered by Housing Direct.
- 2.50 Whilst resident feedback on the system has been positive, uptake has been low. It was explained that some council services are entirely online; this includes the council home bidding process, and the school admissions service. However, only around 100 repairs a month are reported online, as opposed to the 4,000 calls the repairs service receives. The council had set a target of achieving £315,000 savings through the system; however, this would require 2,000 repairs a month being reported online, a significant increase in usage. Officers commented that if these savings targets cannot be achieved then there may be an impact on other aspects of the service.
- 2.51 The Committee was impressed with the online repairs reporting system, and would support further promotion of the system given its effectiveness and potential for financial savings. The Committee also considered that there is scope for further improvements. For example, the system is not able to process communal repairs and it is thought that this would be a positive development.
- 2.52 **The online repairs reporting system should be promoted further to encourage greater usage. It is suggested that the system could be developed further by incorporating the reporting of communal repairs.**
- 2.53 The Committee would support the development of further online housing services. It is noted that some residents are not confident in using online services, and the Committee welcomes initiatives such as the council's Digital Champion Scheme, which is training staff to support residents in getting online. However, it is also acknowledged that some housing services are not

appropriate to migrate entirely online, particularly those which provide essential services to vulnerable people.

#### Other service developments

- 2.54 The Committee received evidence on the refreshed Homes and Communities service, formerly Housing Operations, which included estate services, tenancy services, area housing offices, income collection, concierge services, and the voluntary and community sector team. The service had a renewed focus on developing local communities, supporting health and wellbeing, and supporting residents into employment.
- 2.55 The service redesign will mean that staff will need to work in new and different ways. The stronger emphasis on early intervention, empowerment, resilience and prevention would require staff to have supportive and challenging conversations with residents. Residents could expect to see a greater emphasis on co-designed services, a greater use of online services, and interactions with staff to focus on wellbeing issues as well as core housing functions.
- 2.56 The Committee notes that transformation work in the Homes and Communities service is ongoing and implementation work will take up to 12 months. The Committee supports the new approach of the service, and would welcome a progress update in future.
- 2.57 **The Committee welcomes that the Housing Operations service has been redesigned as a Homes and Communities service. The Committee requests that an update be submitted to the Committee in 12 months' time on progress in transforming the service.**
- 2.58 The Committee supported the council's work to 'make every contact count' and considered if there were unused opportunities to communicate useful information, including wellbeing messages, to residents. It was suggested that better use could be made of large-scale mailings; leaflets could be included in the annual rent statement, and information could be included on the reverse side of letters.
- 2.59 **Better use should be made of mailings to residents, such as the annual rent statement. For example, the reverse side of letters could include information and advice on property maintenance, tenancy management, or promotion of early intervention services. The council should also review the key contact information circulated with the rent statement, as residents commented that they were unsure which teams to contact about different issues.**
- 2.60 The Committee noted that there can be a level of uncertainty among non-housing officers and members in relation to the responsibilities of different teams in the housing service and where enquiries should be directed to. It was suggested that a structure chart should be produced for this purpose.
- 2.61 **The council should produce a structure chart for housing services detailing key officers and the responsibilities of different teams. This would assist officers and councillors in directing their queries.**

### **3. Conclusions**

- 3.1 The Committee has made 19 recommendations in response to the evidence received. These relate to the quality of communications, communicating the right information to residents, supporting staff and joined up working, and other aspects of housing service communications. It is hoped that these recommendations will assist housing services in providing good services on a tight budget.
- 3.2 The Committee recognises the importance of Housing Communications and may wish to continue to review communications-related matters in future.
- 3.3 The Committee would like to thank the officers who provided evidence to the review. The officers interviewed said that they were motivated to provide a good service to residents and were frustrated when things did not go well. Although the review has partially focused on service failures and complaints, the Committee also suggests that services should promote the positive work they are doing on behalf of residents; when the council provides a good service this should be recognised and communicated. The Committee would also like to thank the residents who contributed to the review by providing relevant casework and their views on housing services. The Executive is asked to endorse the Committee's recommendations.



<b>SCRUTINY INITIATION DOCUMENT (SID)</b>
Review: The Effectiveness of Housing Service Communications
Scrutiny Review Committee: Housing Scrutiny Committee
Director leading the review: Maxine Holdsworth, Service Director, Housing Needs and Strategy
Lead officer: Paul Byer, Service Development Manager Lynn Stratton, Deputy Head of Communications and Change
Overall aim: To review the effectiveness of Housing Service communications
<p>Objectives of the review:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To review the effectiveness of verbal, online and written communication channels; with residents, tenant and resident associations, and internally.</li> <li>• To assess if internal processes and staff training are sufficient to achieve effective communication with residents.</li> <li>• To review how Housing Services respond to and learn from feedback and complaints.</li> <li>• To evaluate the take-up of new electronic communication methods used by the Council's Housing Services, if these have been successfully implemented, and plans for any further 'channel shift'.</li> <li>• To review how the council can be assured that the council's contractors and their subcontractors are communicating with residents effectively.</li> <li>• To identify areas of good practice and how housing communications could be improved.</li> </ul>
<p>How is the review to be carried out:</p> <p><u>Scope of the review</u></p> <p>The review will focus on:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Ensuring the quality of communications <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internal communications, including communication between departments and with councillors</li> <li>• External communications to residents, including output from third party contractors</li> <li>• External communications to stakeholders such as TRAs</li> <li>• Communication processes – how are letters and other forms of written communication drafted</li> <li>• Staff training – what training is received?</li> <li>• How the quality of Housing Service communications is evaluated</li> <li>• How the service seeks to achieve consistency</li> <li>• Expectations of service communications</li> </ul> </li> </ol>

2. Feedback, complaints, and resident journeys
  - Examples of common complaints and feedback
  - How Housing Services learn from feedback and complaints
  - How can feedback and complaints processes be improved
  - How can housing services resolve issues to avoid them being escalated
  - Do housing services consider the 'bigger picture' when issues are raised by multiple residents, or are issues considered on an individual basis?
  - What barriers to communication do residents face, and how these can be overcome?
  
3. The development of Housing Communications
  - How do residents prefer to be communicated with?
  - The effectiveness of new online communications methods (inc. repairs reporting)
  - The reasons for 'channel shift' and the benefits and costs of online services
  - Plans for the further development of online services
  - Can the take-up of online communications channels be encouraged?
  - If staff need additional support in communicating with residents
  
4. Organisational culture relating to communications

Types of evidence

- The results of previous reviews of communications
- Feedback received through resident surveys and engagement
- Complaints data
- Website data and website performance information
- Structure chart indicating key communication channels
- Examples of communications related complaints and casework
- Evidence from residents on their priorities, preferences, and experiences.
- Evidence from third parties, such as Partners
- Evidence on best practice
- Workshop for members and officers to jointly review how complaints have been handled, as well as other issues. This could take the form of a focus group with frontline staff such as customer services, Housing Direct, caretakers, service ambassadors, repairs operatives, AHO staff, and complaints teams.

Additional information:

In carrying out the review the committee will consider equalities implications and resident impacts identified by witnesses. The Executive is required to have due regard to these, and any other relevant implications, when responding to the review recommendations.

Programme

Key output:	To be submitted to Committee on:
1. Scrutiny Initiation Document	17 July 2017
2. Draft Recommendations	11 December 2017
3. Final Report	13 March 2018

**The Effectiveness of Housing Services Communications – Witness Evidence Plan**

Overall aim: To review the effectiveness of Housing Service communications.

<b>Committee Meeting – 4 September 2017</b>		
<b>Who / What</b>	<b>Organisation / Purpose</b>	<b>Other key information</b>
Lynn Stratton, Deputy Head of Communication and Change	To provide the committee with a range of information on Housing Communications which will inform the review.	<p>To include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a summary of previous communications reviews,</li> <li>• a summary of resident priorities, regular feedback and complaints</li> <li>• feedback received on specific communications issues, i.e. from the Housing Disability Panel</li> <li>• details of staff training,</li> <li>• details of how staff are supported in communicating (templates etc)</li> <li>• overview of current range of communications channels used by the service</li> <li>• a structure chart identifying key communications channels</li> <li>• how the quality of communications is evaluated,</li> <li>• What is the housing service’s approach to making communications accessible to residents needing different formats?</li> </ul> <p>To meet SID objectives:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To review the effectiveness of verbal, online and written communication channels; with residents, tenant and resident associations, and internally.</li> </ul>
Lorenzo Heanue, Group Leader - Productivity & Compliance	To look in detail at how feedback and complaints are handled – to focus on the Repairs service as a case study of a front line service which receives a number of complex complaints	<p>To include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Examples of common complaints and feedback</li> <li>• How can feedback and complaints processes be improved</li> <li>• How can housing services resolve issues to avoid them being escalated</li> </ul> <p>To meet SID objectives</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To review how Housing Services respond to and learn from feedback and complaints.</li> </ul>

**Committee Meeting – 3 October 2017**

Who / What	Organisation / Purpose	Other key information
Tom Irvine, Deputy Managing Director, Partners for Improvement in Islington	Representative from Partners on how they communicate with residents	To meet objective: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To review how the council can be assured that the council's contractors and their subcontractors are communicating with residents effectively.</li> </ul>
Matt West, Head of Repairs and Maintenance	To provide the Committee with an update on the council's online housing services; including performance and accessibility, the effectiveness of online repairs reporting, the reasons for 'channel shift', how channel shift can be encouraged, and plans for the further development of online services.	To include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Web data and website performance information</li> </ul> To meet objective: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To evaluate the take-up of new electronic communication methods used by the Council's Housing Services, if these have been successfully implemented, and plans for any further 'channel shift'</li> </ul>

**Resident Focus Group – 1 November 2017**

Members of the Committee to interview residents on their priorities, preferences and experiences of housing communications.  Findings of the Focus Group to be reported to the next Committee Meeting	To meet objective: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To review the effectiveness of verbal, online and written communication channels; with residents, tenant and resident associations, and internally.</li> </ul>
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**Staff Focus Group – 6 November 2017**

Members of the Committee to interview staff from a range of front line services – Customer Services, housing Direct, caretakers, service ambassadors, repairs operatives, AHO staff, complaints teams, etc.  Findings of the Focus Group to be reported to the next Committee Meeting	To meet objective: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To assess if internal processes and staff training are sufficient to achieve effective communication with residents.</li> </ul>
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**Committee Meeting – 16 November 2017**

Who / What	Organisation / Purpose	Other key information
Jo Murphy, Service Director – Homes and Communities	To provide a strategic insight into Housing Service communications and to respond to any specific issues raised in the course of the review	To include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Principles and expectations of communication</li> <li>Do housing services consider the 'bigger picture' when issues are raised by multiple residents, or are issues considered on an individual basis?</li> </ul>
Christine Short, Head of Capital Programming	To provide evidence on how capital works contractors communicate with residents, and how the council could seek to influence this.	To meet objective: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To review how the council can be assured that the council's contractors and their subcontractors are communicating with residents effectively.</li> </ul>
Notes of focus groups sessions.	To note the findings of the focus groups held with residents and staff.	

**Draft recommendations – 11 December 2017**

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# **The Council's New Build Programme Mini-Review**

## **DRAFT REPORT OF THE HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**London Borough of Islington  
March 2018**

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### The Council's New Build Programme Mini-Review

#### Aim:

To review the progress of the council's new build programme in comparison to other boroughs.

#### Evidence:

The Committee considered evidence at its December 2017 and January 2018 meeting. Evidence was received from Stephen Nash, New Homes and Development Programme Manager, and officers from the London Borough of Camden. The Committee also received written evidence on specific information requested by members.

#### Main Findings:

- The objective of Islington's new build programme is to maximise the amount of social rented housing in the borough. This is achieved by the development of new social housing, and also the development of private housing, the proceeds of which are re-invested into the new build programme.
- The type of units developed by the council is informed by the needs of residents on the housing waiting list. In order to reduce overcrowding, the council is developing a high proportion of two-bed units, as well as family sized three and four bed properties.
- Officers advised of the challenges of achieving the corporate objective of delivering 500 new council homes between 2014/15 and 2019/20. Although the council is currently behind target, it is expected that delays will be overcome shortly and the council will exceed this objective.
- Overall, the Committee welcomes the new build team's consultation practices, however considers that there is scope to develop these further, particularly in relation to significant new build schemes. The council should ensure that local concerns are addressed as far as possible and developments are progressed in cooperation with the majority of the local community.
- The Committee considered the financial challenges associated with the new build programme. Camden Council is lobbying the government to relax restrictions on right to buy receipts and the Committee suggests that a sector-wide joined up approach to new build funding might yield better results.
- The Committee was supportive of high environmental standards in new build housing and noted that these measures can reduce utility bills for residents.
- The Committee considers that if the council is to significantly increase the amount of affordable housing developed in the borough, then robust conversations about housing association ambitions and aspirations are needed.

#### Conclusions:

The Committee is supportive of the council's ambitious new build programme. Three recommendations have been made in response to the evidence received. The Committee will continue to monitor the number of affordable new council and housing association homes built through quarterly performance monitoring reports. The Committee would like to thank the witnesses that gave evidence in relation to the scrutiny. The Executive is asked to endorse the Committee's recommendations.



**Recommendations:**

1. Islington Council should consider if it can enhance public engagement and consultation processes in advance of significant new build schemes. This could include holding community events, the appointment of local residents to community liaison positions, and co-designing aspects of the scheme that will have a direct impact on local residents.
2. Islington Council should work with other local authorities to lobby for relaxed restrictions on the use of right-to-buy receipts and HRA borrowing.
3. Islington Council should consider how it can support or incentivise Housing Associations to deliver a greater amount of new affordable housing on development sites.

## MEMBERSHIP OF THE HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 2017/18

### **Councillors:**

Councillor Mick O’Sullivan (Chair)  
Councillor Marian Spall (Vice-Chair)  
Councillor Alex Diner  
Councillor Gary Doolan  
Councillor Aysegul Erdogan  
Councillor Troy Gallagher  
Councillor Osh Gantly  
Councillor Mouna Hamitouche MBE

### **Resident Observers:**

Rose Marie McDonald  
Dean Donaghey

### **Substitutes:**

Councillor Satnam Gill OBE  
Councillor Gary Heather  
Councillor Jenny Kay  
Councillor Una O’Halloran  
Councillor Olly Parker  
Councillor Angela Picknell  
Councillor Dave Poyser  
Councillor Nurullah Turan

### **Acknowledgements:**

*The Committee would like to thank all the witnesses who gave evidence to the review.*

### **Officer Support:**

*Stephen Nash – New Homes and Development Manager.  
Jonathan Moore – Senior Democratic Services Officer*

## 1. Introduction

- 1.1 The mini-review took place over two meetings in December 2017 and January 2018. The overall aim of the review was to review the progress of the council's new build programme in comparison to other boroughs.

The Committee also agreed the following objectives:

- To review the principles underpinning the council's new build programme.
  - To review the design, build, and environmental standards of the council's new build housing.
  - To assess the obstacles to developing more council housing in Islington.
  - To evaluate the decision making process for how new council developments are identified and progressed.
  - To assess the level of resident involvement in the new build process.
  - To consider how new build properties are allocated.
  - To evaluate the performance of the New Build team.
  - To compare the council's approach to new build to another London borough and housing associations.
- 1.2 In carrying out the review the Committee met with the council's New Homes and Development Manager and officers from the neighbouring London Borough of Camden.

### Local context

- 1.3 Islington is an area of severe housing need. There are around 20,000 households on the housing register, but only around 1,000 council homes become available each year. 40% of council homes are one-bedroom properties and are not suitable for families. As a result, many Islington families suffer from overcrowding. Overcrowding is associated with increased physical and mental health problems and poor educational achievement by children. It can also have an impact on family life and relationships and lead to family breakdown.
- 1.4 Islington's Corporate Plan 2015-19 identifies building more council housing as its first priority. The corporate plan committed to the development of 2,000 affordable homes between 2015 and 2019, including 500 new council homes. In addition, Islington Council has committed to the development of more new homes in future; the 2018-21 capital programme allocates over £224 million to new council housing.

## 2. Findings

### Overview of Islington's New Build Programme

- 2.1 The objective of Islington's new build programme is to maximise the amount of social rented housing in the borough. This is achieved by the development of new social housing, and also the development of private housing, the proceeds of which are re-invested into the new build programme. Although private units are sold on the open market, priority is given to those who live or work in Islington. The council does not sell new build units to foreign investors, and does not want to sell to buy-to-let landlords.
- 2.2 The new build programme does not generate any 'profit'. Occasionally a new build scheme may achieve a surplus, for example if rising property values result in private units achieving a higher than expected sale price. In this instance, any surplus is re-invested into the new build programme.

- 2.3 The type of units developed by the council is informed by the needs of residents on the housing waiting list. In order to reduce overcrowding, the council is developing a high proportion of two-bed units, as well as family sized three and four bed properties. The council is also developing a small amount of supported housing for vulnerable people, as well as community infrastructure such as libraries and community centres. New build properties are allocated in accordance with the council's local lettings policy, which gives priority to those on the estates where new units are being developed.
- 2.4 The council has a framework contract with local architects, including the council's own in-house architects, to design new build schemes. The build process is carried out by contractors appointed on a 60% quality, 40% cost basis. Officers emphasised that there was no benefit to building poor quality social rented housing. The New Build team makes use of a robust set of Employers Requirements. This ensures that properties meet, and often exceeded, the standards set out in the London Design Guide. All works are signed off by Islington Council Building Control, who carry out regular inspections during the construction process.
- 2.5 The New Build team had considered innovative approaches to maximising the amount of social rented housing. This included build-overs of existing blocks and the development of modular housing. The majority of new council developments are located on small council-owned sites. The team also considered the purchase of development sites on the open market, however this was challenging as the council can be outbid by private developers, who have significant financial resources. It was suggested that some private developers are prepared to pay over market value for sites, with the intention of maximising their profit by reducing the affordable housing offer.
- 2.6 The New Build Team considers various factors when identifying sites for development, including if the site attracts anti-social behaviour. The new build team looked to design-out antisocial behaviour in new developments.
- 2.7 The New Build team has made approaches to develop land held by other public bodies, such as the Police, Fire Brigade, GLA, Ministry of Defence and the NHS; however this has not been successful so far. It is understood that these organisations have their own financial difficulties and usually wish to achieve the highest possible sale price for their sites.
- 2.8 Islington Council generally does not 'pepper pot' private and social housing in mixed developments. Instead, the council tends to develop separate private and social housing blocks. The Committee noted concerns about community cohesion and the social mix of the borough, however, officers advised that developing separate blocks maximised the sale value of private housing and therefore ensured a greater subsidy for social rented housing. Officers also commented that it was more difficult to manage mixed blocks of private and social housing. Evidence from Camden Council indicated that they also did not 'pepper pot' schemes, highlighting different expectations between private and social tenants.
- 2.9 Officers advised of the challenges of achieving the corporate objective of delivering 500 new council homes between 2014/15 and 2019/20. At December 2017, 250 homes had been completed; 9 schemes were on site and would provide 317 homes; and a further 11 schemes were due to commence during 2018/19 which would provide 333 homes. Although the council was intending to exceed the corporate objective, the new build programme was behind target. It was explained that there had been delays to the completion of new build schemes, which included delays to Network Rail completing works affecting development sites, delays to utility companies connecting new build properties to their networks, the discovery of asbestos and bones requiring investigation and removal, and delays associated with pressures in the Planning and Legal departments. Nevertheless, it is expected that these delays will be overcome shortly and the council will achieve its objective.

## Public engagement

- 2.10 The New Build team is keen to involve residents in the design process and carries out consultations as schemes are developed. The level of consultation is bespoke to the scheme and dependent on the scale of the development; major developments require a significant amount of public consultation, whereas more limited consultation is carried out on smaller schemes. Consultation methods currently used by the New Build team include door knocking, drop-in sessions, exhibitions and producing publicity. Officers advised that one to one engagement tended to result in more measured and useful comments. Public meetings were occasionally held, however officers commented that these could be fractious.
- 2.11 Consultation is carried out with specific groups when appropriate. For example, the Housing Disability Panel may be consulted when new developments include adapted properties. The Committee notes that the Islington Fair Futures Commission has recommended that all major developments in the borough should include consultation with children and young people. The council carried out specific consultation with both young people and older people in advance of the Kings Square development.
- 2.12 Officers commented that improvements had been made to the public engagement process in recent years; there was a suggestion that consultation had previously been rushed, however officers now took more time to work through local concerns before development commenced. However, officers acknowledged that engagement and consultation processes could be improved further.
- 2.13 If the council is to significantly address the housing need in the borough through its new build programme, then it is possible that the council will need to focus on larger developments in future. However, the committee appreciates that larger developments tend to attract a higher level of public opposition. Larger developments will require an enhanced level of engagement and public consultation to ensure that local concerns are addressed as far as possible and developments are progressed in cooperation with the majority of the local community.
- 2.14 The Committee received evidence from the London Borough of Camden on their public engagement practices. Camden was carrying out a major rebuild of the Agar Grove estate which would double the density of the estate. Whilst there had been initial opposition to the proposals, the scheme was now progressing with the support of the majority of residents. Camden officers emphasised the importance of community engagement, commenting that transparency and working collaboratively with the local community was essential. Schemes were co-designed with the community and developments provided local residents with new community facilities. Local people were not only consulted on the design of the new properties, but helped to develop decant strategies, and were involved in the selection of architects.
- 2.15 Camden had employed local residents to provide peer-to-peer liaison on new housing schemes; these residents had a strong presence in their local area, and were well placed to engage with the local community. Camden had also sought to address local opposition by giving scheme-specific commitments on new developments. For example, if local concerns focused around a loss of greenspace, then Camden would seek to re-provide the same amount of greenspace in the vicinity of the development. Camden Council also held community events, which attracted a different audience to traditional formal consultation meetings.

- 2.16 Overall, the Committee welcomes the new build team's consultation practices, however considers that there is scope to develop these further, particularly in relation to significant new build schemes. It is recommended that **Islington Council should consider if it can enhance public engagement and consultation processes in advance of significant new build schemes. This could include holding community events, the appointment of local residents to community liaison positions, and co-designing aspects of the scheme that will have a direct impact on local residents.**

#### Financial Challenges

- 2.17 The Committee considered the financial challenges associated with the new build programme. The government's annual 1% cut in social rents had an adverse impact on the Housing Revenue Account and in turn the new build programme. The development of some schemes had been paused and others had stopped altogether. As a consequence, Islington Council was primarily funding the new build programme through receipts from property sales, without significantly drawing on the HRA.
- 2.18 Some local authorities fund new build schemes through borrowing, however the HRA borrowing cap limits the amount that local authorities are able to borrow for this purpose. In late 2017, the government announced that the HRA borrowing cap could be lifted for local authorities in high need. Islington Council has already applied to the Treasury requesting that its borrowing cap be lifted; however it is understood that several other local authorities have made similar requests, and it is not known when a response will be received.
- 2.19 Construction costs had increased following the EU referendum, and it was expected that costs would increase further after Brexit. Officers advised that the average construction cost of each home was around £290,000; however the total cost, including contribution to local public realm improvements, landscaping, demolition costs, legal and planning fees, the provision of community facilities and so on, was in the region of £380,000.
- 2.20 The government had previously pledged that Right to Buy properties would be replaced on a 'one for one' basis. However, officers advised that for each unit lost the council only received approximately 30% of the construction cost of a single unit. The use of these funds was tightly regulated, and the government prohibited them being combined with other forms of "public subsidy", such as GLA grant funding, to develop new housing.
- 2.21 Camden Council is lobbying the government to relax restrictions on right to buy receipts and the Committee suggests that a sector-wide joined up approach to new build funding might yield better results. It is therefore recommended that **Islington Council should work with other local authorities to lobby for relaxed restrictions on the use of right-to-buy receipts and HRA borrowing.**

#### Environmental matters

- 2.22 The Committee noted the environmental standards of Islington Council's new build housing. Solar panels were fitted where appropriate and properties were well insulated, which was both energy efficient and helped to reduce fuel poverty. The New Build team was working with officers in the Energy Team and Property Services to ensure that schemes were energy efficient and were designed in a sustainable way, with components that were easy to maintain.

- 2.23 Officers have commented that Islington's energy performance requirements are robust. The council aims to achieve 'Code for Sustainable Homes Level 4' in its new developments, even though this is no longer a requirement. The code covers a range of sustainability criteria including energy efficiency and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, water saving measures, the environmental impact of materials, the minimisation of pollution, reducing waste in the construction process, and other matters.
- 2.24 The Committee heard that Camden Council was also developing properties to high environmental standards; some properties were being built to the passivhaus standard, in which homes are highly insulated and heated through the circulation of air. Camden officers commented that these homes were very energy efficient, and the council had received comments that some of these homes were too warm, rather than too cold. Some Camden properties also made use of rainwater for flushing toilets.
- 2.25 The Committee is supportive of new build properties meeting high environmental and energy performance standards, and would welcome the development of more homes built to the passivhaus standard. It is noted that homes with a high energy performance rating help to reduce utility bills for residents.

#### Working with housing associations

- 2.26 The Committee recognises that Islington Council is not able to end the housing crisis alone. The Committee is keen for the council to work in close partnership with housing associations that are willing to develop high quality, genuinely affordable, social housing in the borough. The Committee considered details of proposed housing association new build developments up to 2020/21, and expressed concern that some of these contained a low proportion of affordable housing. Islington's planning policies require that new developments achieve the maximum reasonable amount of affordable housing, which should be around 50%. The Committee did not consider the detail of all proposed housing association schemes, however noted that several proposed schemes were due to achieve significantly less than this amount.
- 2.27 The Committee raised concerns that the process through which housing associations bid for development sites put these organisations in competition with each other. This could artificially inflate the cost of schemes and therefore decrease the viability of social housing. The Committee considers that if the council is to significantly increase the amount of affordable housing developed in the borough, then robust conversations about housing association ambitions and aspirations are needed. The Committee would support a joined up and strategic approach to working with Housing Associations which encourages and incentivises them to develop a high proportion of affordable housing in the borough.
- 2.28 It is therefore recommended that **Islington Council should consider how it can support or incentivise Housing Associations to deliver a greater amount of new affordable housing on development sites.**

#### Other findings

- 2.29 The Committee queried the toxicity of paint used in council developments. It was advised that the paint was a well-known brand suitable for internal walls and was hardwearing in communal areas.

2.30 The council's new build schemes met Building Control regulations regarding entrances and exits. One entrance/exit was acceptable if there was enhanced protection for the staircases, generally achieved through ventilation. Officers advised that providing more than one entrance/exit would reduce the number of new homes built.

### **3. Conclusions**

3.1 The Committee is supportive of the council's ambitious new build programme. Three recommendations have been made in response to the evidence received. The Committee will continue to monitor the number of affordable new council and housing association homes built through quarterly performance monitoring reports. The Committee would like to thank the witnesses that gave evidence in relation to the scrutiny. The Executive is asked to endorse the Committee's recommendations.



<b>SCRUTINY INITIATION DOCUMENT (SID)</b>
Title: The Council's New Build Programme (Mini-Review)
Scrutiny Review Committee: Housing Scrutiny Committee
Director leading the review: Sean McLaughlin, Corporate Director of Housing and Adult Social Services
Lead officer: Stephen Nash, New Homes and Development Programme Manager
Overall aim: To review the progress of the council's new build programme in comparison to other boroughs.
<p>Objectives of the review:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To review the principles underpinning the council's new build programme.</li> <li>• To review the design, build, and environmental standards of the council's new build housing.</li> <li>• To assess the obstacles to developing more council housing in Islington.</li> <li>• To evaluate the decision making process for how new council developments are identified and progressed.</li> <li>• To assess the level of resident involvement in the new build process.</li> <li>• To consider how new build properties are allocated.</li> <li>• To evaluate the performance of the New Build team.</li> <li>• To compare the council's approach to new build to another London borough and housing associations.</li> </ul>
<p>How is the review to be carried out:</p> <p><u>Scope of the review</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The principles of the new build programme; including what type of properties are developed, and what proportion of properties are for social housing, shared rent, and private ownership.</li> <li>• The design, build and environmental standards the new build programme must meet, and how these are achieved.</li> <li>• The obstacles to development, including financial and planning constraints and land availability.</li> <li>• Decision-making processes, and how the new build programme is managed and funded.</li> <li>• Resident engagement in the new build programme.</li> <li>• How the council's new build properties are allocated, including social, shared-ownership and private housing.</li> <li>• Performance against corporate targets.</li> <li>• How the council's new build programme compares to that of another London borough.</li> </ul>

- Design standards in regards to entrance and exit routes in both high rise and low rise properties
- Environmental standards in regards to the toxicity of paint
- The checks and balances related to decision-making on design and build choices, including decisions on the use of materials such as cladding.
- The average building costs of new housing schemes
- How housing revenue account surplus is spent, and if any funds are allocated to new build projects.

Types of evidence

- Evidence from officers in the New Build team.
- Evidence on another London borough's new build programme.
- Potential visit to new build properties.

Additional information:

Building new council homes is a key priority of the council. The Corporate Plan 2015-19 identifies 'Building more council housing and supporting private renters' as a priority, setting a target of 500 new council homes over the period.

In carrying out the review the committee will consider equalities implications and resident impacts identified by witnesses. The Executive is required to have due regard to these, and any other relevant implications, when responding to the review recommendations.

Programme	
Key output:	To be submitted to Committee on:
1. Scrutiny Initiation Document	11 December 2017
2. Recommendations & Report	13 March 2018