

**Housing Scrutiny Committee - 19 November 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 19 November 2018 at 7.30 pm.

**Present:**      **Councillors:**      O'Sullivan (Chair), Lukes (Vice-Chair), Debono, Hamitouche, Heather, Mackmurdie, O'Halloran, Russell, McDonald and Dean

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

**39      APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Item 1)**

Apologies were received from Councillor Gallagher.

**40      DECLARATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (Item 2)**

There were no declarations of substitute members.

**41      DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS (Item 3)**

There were no declarations of interest.

**42      MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING (Item 4)**

**RESOLVED:**

That the minutes of the meeting held on 16 October 2018 be confirmed as an accurate record of proceedings and the Chair be authorised to sign them.

**43      CHAIR'S REPORT (Item 5)**

The meeting was informed that central government's decision to remove the cap on prudential borrowing for house building would allow Councils build more social and affordable housing.

The Chair welcomed the recent decision to remove the cap on rent increase of council tenants especially as local authorities had been denied funds for reinvestment and maintenance of their housing stock.

Members were reminded of the forthcoming home and build exhibition taking place on 28 and 29 November 2018 especially for those interested in housing related issues.

The Chair reminded Members of the pending site visit to Brewery Road on Tuesday 4 December, to be facilitated by the committee clerk, an opportunity for Members to view the dashboard and speak to the front line staff within the Responsive Repairs services.

**44      ORDER OF BUSINESS (Item 6)**

The order of business would be as per the agenda.

45 **PUBLIC QUESTIONS (Item 7)**

46 **HOUSING ASSOCIATION SCRUTINY - CLARION HOUSING GROUP (Item B1)**

The Committee received a presentation from Catherine Kyne, Regional Director of Housing Director, and Vicky Bonner, Director of Housing on Clarion's work as a landlord in the borough.

The following main points were noted in the discussion:

- Clarion Housing currently manages 3,687 properties located within the Archway, Holloway and Tufnell Park areas of Islington and it includes all the various types of tenure.
- 80% of Clarion residents are satisfied with the service they receive and although complaints are still high, there has been a significant improvement in comparison to previous years.
- Repairs has been brought back in house to improve the service provision for residents and address legacy repair issues.
- Clarion's in-house response repairs service completes over 1,000 repairs a day and 82.6% of repairs are resolved as first time fixes.
- Clarion is committed to providing affordable homes for those excluded by the housing market and will work with Islington Council to address this issue. Clarion has a development programme to deliver 50,000 homes in 10 years.
- Due to the changes to the welfare benefits system, the organisation has put in place 25 experienced welfare benefits advisers to support residents to manage their finances and help with the application process. Clarion recognises the challenges from the implementation of the universal credit.
- On the green paper on housing, the meeting was advised that it had gathered resident's feedback and used this to respond on the recommendations. Clarion supports meaningful reforms that improves life quality and service for all its resident's.
- In terms of future plans, Clarion continues to explore with the Council on how it can support the delivery of new homes. It has brought forward its planned work programme to address previous under investment in street properties.

Clarion futures, the charitable arm of Clarion has a large employment and training department which works with key partners and residents. It also works with young people across all its boroughs to support its strategy to improve their lives.

- There has been relatively few cases of anti-social behaviour associated with Clarion properties in the borough.
- Clarion's inability to develop new homes in the borough was due to high land values, however it welcomes the opportunity to work jointly with Islington Council to find creative ways to address this issue.

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- Clarion tenants are offered fixed terms instead of life tenancies and this was in line with governments policy that social housing should be restricted to those in need however following the recent changes, the organisation is looking at this and will communicate any changes to the borough.
- In response to complaints about the service of repairs, Clarion acknowledged that the service is not where it wants it to be and that there is scope for more work on improving the levels of resident satisfaction.
- On concerns about lack of communication with residents of Minerva Lodge, a sheltered home, the Director advised members that Clarion officers would be visiting the home to better understand the concerns and rectify the issues raised.
- With regards to the complaints process, the meeting was informed that both stage two and Member complaints are escalated to senior managers and as part of improving complaint resolution times it has put in place a regional performance team with the aim of addressing the complaints and developing a lessons learnt system.
- The meeting was advised that the recent decision to change the contractors employed for responsive repairs has resulted to an increase in the level of resident satisfaction, Clarion recognises that there is room for more work to be done and that there will be a dip in services as it stabilises the new service.
- In response to concerns that resolving repairs took 3 visits, the meeting was advised that the programme of developing multi skilled operatives would result in an increase in first time fixes.
- The meeting was advised that having terminated its contract with Wates, Clarion decided to bring the repair service in house.
- Members were informed that although some of the complaints are historical, Clarion is determined to address long standing issues such as boiler replacements, damp, design of kitchens etc. In addition Clarion has brought forward its cyclical works programme for its properties and will be liaising with its resident on the various works planned at their property.
- In response to fire safety concerns within housing blocks, the meeting was advised that regular fire assessments are carried out in all their properties and the details are published on Clarion's website for transparency and assurance to residents. To allay resident's concerns about fire incidents, a programme has been put in place to install safety lights and alarms communal hallways.
- Clarion has a programme to check and when required replace the external fire doors for all its street properties and in the case of multi-purpose blocks its internal doors.
- With regard to Clarion's surplus of £152million in the previous year, Officers informed the meeting that this should be looked at in the context that there is over £1 billion debt that is required to service the housing programmes of building new homes and maintaining its current stock. Members were advised that the surplus is re-invested back into improving and providing housing and resident services.

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- In response to enquiries about staff and Board diversity, the salary ratio between management and the low paid staff and if Clarion pays its staff the London living wage, the Director advised that they do not have this information and if collated the information would be provided to Members through the Committee clerk.
- In response to questions on tenancy, the meeting was advised that an affordability assessment for residents is carried out and a narrative would be circulated to Committee members.

The Chair thanked Clarion Housing for their attendance and welcomed their plans to address the long standing repairs of their residents, however there was still concern that the organisation could do more especially in the provision of homes in the borough and in the maintenance of their existing stock of housing. “

### 47 **QUARTERLY REVIEW OF HOUSING PERFORMANCE (Q2 2018/19) (Item B2)**

Councillor Diarmaid Ward, Executive Member for Housing and Development, presented the quarterly performance update.

The following main points were noted in the discussion:

- Members were informed that the forecast for 2018/19 is on target. The Council is currently on target to deliver 637 new affordable homes with the aim of building 2,000 homes by 2022.
- The Council's target for downsizing residents into smaller dwellers remains a challenge and welcomed any suggestions or incentives to encourage residents. The Executive Member acknowledged that the dearth of two bedroom dwellings in the borough is an ongoing issue and a suggestion to transform void properties into smaller dwellings would be difficult especially with the Council's long housing waiting list and the high demand for family dwellings.
- The Executive Member for Housing informed the meeting that following Committee's recommendation to restructure the new build team, a new management support officer has been put in place to manage performance, information and build relationships with Council partners.
- Meeting was informed that the Council's 2016 intake of apprentices had completed their course, with the majority of them applying for fulltime position in the Council. In response to a question, the meeting was advised that the Council take on 6 apprentices annually for a 3-4 year programme.
- The Council currently undertakes over 70,000 responsive repairs and 12,000 gas repairs had been carried out and that a survey by an independent company shows that customer satisfaction is high. In addition, Members were informed that the first batches of operatives had completed their multi-skill training and were now undergoing further support in the field to practice their new skills, with the result that it would lead to a further increase in the number of First Time Fix job completion.
- The Council welcomes the detailed breakdown of repairs data provided by Partners Improvement as an improvement to how previously repairs was reported.

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- The Council recognises the impact of the Universal credit on its tenants in terms of rent arrears, its implementation and the amount of monies received, so an extensive programme has been put in place to assist claimants.
- The Executive Member for Housing welcomed Committee's decision to review aspects of homelessness and rough sleeping, however noted that a key factor in the increase in homelessness around the country is the loss of assured tenancy. Members of the Committee were invited to participate in the homeless count scheduled for November 29.
- In response to a Member's concern that delays in the implementation of universal Credit for some council tenants could be attributed to Council mistakes, the Executive Member for Housing indicated that he was not aware of any such incidents, however advised that such cases if brought to the attention of Members should be referred to him and he will ensure it is speedily resolved.

### **RESOLVED:**

That the progress to the end of quarter 2 against key performance indicators be noted.

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### **SCRUTINY REVIEW RESPONSIVE REPAIRS: WITNESS EVIDENCE ( GAS MANAGEMENT) (Item B3)**

The Committee received a presentation on Gas Management by Anne Bagland, the Head of Investment Finance and Safety which covered gas repairs and servicing process, the current challenges and future plans for the Service.

The following main points were noted in the presentation and in the discussion:

- The council has a combined in house/subcontractor gas repairs service in the North of the borough and a gas contractor operating in the south of the borough.
- Across the borough, repairs classified as urgent are completed within 24 hrs. At present the gas team has 12 operatives and 3 apprentices and the total revenue budget is £3.8 million.
- Islington carries out its annual gas safety checks for all its properties and the whole process commences 8 weeks before the property is deemed as non-compliant. Letters are sent out informing residents of gas servicing checks, with details to make arrangements to access the dwelling.
- In response to concerns regarding gas safety check appointments for residents and a suggestion of being flexible, members were advised that there is presently no demand for a service to be provided beyond the normal core hours and there is an issue of cost which the Service would need to consider. There are plans to introduce an 'MOT' style servicing which aims to profile servicing over the summer months. A longer term objective is to utilise OneServe - online servicing system which will allow residents to book and amend bookings, thereby addressing concerns regarding booking appointments.
- With regards to performance levels, the meeting was advised that customer satisfaction is high at 95% considering that all attempts are made to gain access into properties. In response to a question on how complaints are handled, the meeting

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was informed that the service takes each complaint seriously and lessons learnt are taken on board.

- In response to questions on forced entry into properties to carry out gas safety checks, members were reminded that this would require the Council applying to court for a warrant, however numbers are relatively low because access is usually secured prior to the property becoming non-compliant.
- In terms of future plans, the service is considering how to improve its gas boiler installation process especially as resident's complaints tends to be around issues such as the lack of both heating and hot water for a sustained period of time.
- The manager advised that although an industry wide issue, the lack of quality, skilled and experienced engineers is being addressed by a major recruitment drive and have in the team 3 lead engineers to help support existing operatives. The team presently has a full complement of very experienced gas inspectors who provide assurance around risk and safety by looking at 100% of the annual gas certificates issued to ensure compliance with the gas regulations. The meeting was informed of the 3 apprentices in the team working alongside experienced staff with the hope that being a gas safety engineer will be a chosen career for the apprentice.
- In response to a question on challenges experienced by the gas repair service, the manager advised that there is a dearth of experienced gas engineers, an industry wide issue which has resulted in to a huge recruitment drive for skilled engineers by the Council.
- The service is looking at improving its management of van stock which are used by the operatives as this would ensure that the rate of first time fixes is improved and increase customer satisfaction levels.
- The manager informed Committee issues such as sickness absence and competency with staff had been addressed.
- With regards to the properties managed by PFI which will be brought back in house after the expiration of their management contract, members were informed that the service is aware and are considering what actions to take especially in terms of boiler replacements.
- In response to concerns that safety checks were not being carried out in leaseholder's flat who reside in the same block of flat with council tenants, the manager acknowledged that the service is directed at tenanted properties and not home owners as there is no legislation that stipulates home owners should undertake gas checks.
- A suggestion on whether leaseholders could be encouraged to carry out safety checks at a lower cost especially for older and vulnerable leaseholders was noted.
- In response to a question on whether operatives were aware of the personal circumstances of the residents when carrying out repairs, the meeting was informed that all tenants provide their status when signing their tenancy agreement and also information is provided by housing Support officers and the Area Housing team and that all attempts are made to ensure that data on all residents are kept up to date.
- In response to a question on whether there was scope to take on more apprentices, the Manager informed members that employment of 3 apprentices in a team of 12

was a significant proportion of staff, however this could change if the team is enlarged however as resident safety was paramount it was important to have in place experienced gas engineers and operatives.

The Chair thanked Anne Bagland for the presentation and their responses.

**49 SCRUTINY REVIEW: SID AND INTRODUCTORY PRESENTATION (HOMELESSNESS) (Item B4)**

The Committee considered the Scrutiny Initiation Document and the following suggestions were made to the document below:

(i) Aim of the review should be amended to read - To explore how the Council's Housing Needs Service tackles homelessness and delivers on its key performance indicators and reduce Homelessness.

(ii) Under the heading of how the review is to be carried out , the paragraph should include Evidence from St Mungo's, SHP, Islington Law Centre, Shelter, Pillion Trust, and Community based organisations that advocate on behalf of homelessness.

(ii) With regard to the scope of review, amend second bulletin point to read - To consider whether the Service is maximising on opportunities to prevent homelessness

(iv) A suggestion that evidence could be taken from homeless people and residents.

**RESOLVED:**

That the Scrutiny Initiation Document be amended to reflect the changes above and circulated to Members for consideration. Scrutiny Initiation document to be approved at the next meeting of the Committee.

**50 WORK PROGRAMME 2018/19 (Item B5)**

**RESOLVED:**

That the work programme be noted

The meeting ended at 10.10 pm

**CHAIR**