

London Borough of Islington

Housing Scrutiny Committee - 12 February 2019

Minutes of the meeting of the Housing Scrutiny Committee held at Committee Room 4, Town Hall, Upper Street, N1 2UD - Islington Town Hall on 12 February 2019 at 7.30 pm.

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

Resident Rose McDonald and Dean Donaghey
Observer

Councillor Michael O'Sullivan in the Chair

61 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Item 1)

Apologies were received from Councillor Hamitouche.

62 DECLARATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (Item 2)

There were no declarations of substitute members.

63 DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS (Item 3)

There were no declarations of interest.

64 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING (Item 4)

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 14 January 2019 be confirmed as an accurate record of proceedings and the Chair be authorised to sign them.

65 CHAIR'S REPORT (Item 5)

The Chair informed the meeting that draft recommendations with regards to the review into Responsive Repairs will be circulated to Committee members in advance of the committee meeting in March. Members input to the exercise is welcomed and should be sent to the Committee clerk ahead of the meeting.

66 ORDER OF BUSINESS (Item 6)

The order of business would be B2 and B1.

67 PUBLIC QUESTIONS (Item 7)

None

68 SCRUTINY OF PARTNERS FOR IMPROVEMENT IN ISLINGTON (Item B1)

The Committee received a presentation from Tom Irvine, Managing Director, on the performance of Partners for Improvement in Islington.

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The following main points were noted in the discussion:

- Meeting was advised that in terms of key performance indicators, Partners had exceeded most of its targets especially in terms of the number of repairs completed on time; communal repairs completed on time and importantly the number of residents satisfied with the repairs.
- 164 major repairs were carried out by Partners from January to December 2018, however only 50 were left open for 12 weeks or more as a result of access issues, leaseholder consultation in progress; building control/conservation/ planning process etc.
- With regard to PF12 contract, cyclical works were completed to 496 properties with an average time of 12.8 weeks to complete the works. Meeting was advised that with regards to the works carried out, there was a 92% satisfaction rate by residents that took part in the survey. Plans in 2019 for Partners to complete 100 cyclical works with the PF11 contracts.
- With regard to resident engagement, the Managing Director highlighted the various channels through which Partners communicates with its resident such as the Partners Residents Open Forum; the existence of Partners Engagement Register; Resident surgeries and Satisfaction surveys.
- The Managing Director acknowledged that in terms of complaints, there has been a slight increase in stage one complaints in comparison to the previous year.
- Partners priorities for 2018/19 include promoting safety and minimising risks in properties, providing a good and efficient service to its customers; continue to communicate and engage with its residents and also provide a good service to its leaseholders.
- The Managing Director acknowledged the various issues and challenges highlighted by residents and leaseholders as the clear and safe communal areas policy; access issues into properties to be able to carry out repairs; impact of universal credit on residents in terms of rent arrears; leaseholder estimates of cyclical cost of repairs and anti-social behaviour.
- Members were advised that residents were split with regards to the Clear and Safe Communal area policy, however Partners still had to carry out multiple visits to resolve complaints on this issue. Members were reminded that the implementation of the policy is based on advice from the London Fire Brigade.
- The meeting was informed that with over 17,000 repairs carried out per year, 2,000 were affected due to failure to access the properties by operatives and to address this concern, Partners are offering incentives to residents to provide a copy of keys to communal areas so as to carry out electrical safety checks.
- Partners recognises the impact of universal credit on its tenants especially as 219 of 279 known claimants are in rent arrears. Partners continues to work closely with Islington Council to alleviate its impact by intervening early in known cases and close monitoring.
- With regard to the estimated costs of cyclical decorations received by leaseholders, the Managing Director informed the meeting that these were estimates and are

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based on an agreed maximum price policy, however the final costs total tend to be lower. In addition, Partners had improved the format and content of information that accompanies Section 20 notices.

- The Managing Director advised that delays in resolving anti-social behaviour was due to court closures which resulted in delays r waits for court dates and also in some instances the need to carry out the assessment of vulnerable victims and the perpetrators.
- Members were concerned with Partners strong performance results especially as their caseloads indicates high levels of dissatisfaction. There was concern that despite informing Partners in previous years that their focus should be on addressing their failures Partners still consistently produces high performance rates.
- Properties managed under the PF11 contract, which expires in 2033, would undergo a programme of external redecoration commences in 2019 while the PF12 contract due to expire in 2022, cyclical decorations would end in 2020.
- The meeting was informed that 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.
- In response to a complaint regarding the quality of repairs work carried out by Partners and the quality of materials used, the Managing Director advised that all their properties are maintained to the contractual standard and quality assured agreed with the Council.
- A member of the public highlighted significant maintenance issues in the home of one of her brothers, describing plasterwork falling dangerously from overhead with the result that he had to be moved out. She also described how her other brother had to leave his home due to flooding and that more worrying was that despite Partners denial about the existence of asbestos in the property, information has come to light that Partners was aware of this issue since 2008. Managing Director apologised as he was not aware of the issue and requested that documentations be forwarded to Partners via the clerk Committee.
- Dr Brian Potter of the Islington Leaseholders Association invited the Managing Director of Partners to the next meeting on April 2, an opportunity for leaseholders to raise all their concerns directly.
- A suggestion that Key Performance indicators should be presented at the Partners Residents Open Forum was noted.
- A leaseholder in a property managed by Partners was concerned that for over 8 years he had complained about damp issues in his property and was intrigued by Partners refusal to employ the services of an independent surveyor. The leaseholder was concerned that with every works carried out by Partners, his and other leaseholders service charges was increased under the guise of repairs to damp repairs which had not been carried out. In response the Managing Director acknowledged that, services of independent surveyors are employed to identify the causes of damp.
- A leaseholder was concerned with the business decision of Partners taking over a community building that had been previously managed by Hyde. The leaseholder

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enquired if the committee would be interested in a piece of work that will demonstrate the impact of that decision on the amenity of the residents that live on the estate. In response, the Chair welcomed the suggestion, advising that the report be sent to the clerk of the committee for circulation to members on the Committee and the Executive Member for Housing.

- The Managing Director acknowledged that permission was incorrectly given to a resident for storage of his bicycles, however this has now been resolved.
- A tenant in a property managed by Partners complained about contractors sent to resolve sewage issues and having been told that digging will be confined outside, some areas of her dwelling was left in a state of disrepair and personal property like her reading glasses was found at the rear of the garden and damaged. The Managing Director of Partners requested her to forward her details and he would look into it.
- With regards to concerns about the discrepancies that exist between the estimates and the final cost schedule, the meeting was informed that Partners had made some revisions to the schedule 20, however in light of further concerns, this will be revisited to ensure that it is clear and transparent.
- Members were concerned that Partners were reportedly made aware of asbestos in the property of the complainant mentioned above since 2008 but refused to resolve it and requested that someone needs to be held accountable especially if true as Council takes the management of asbestos and its disposal seriously. Committee agreed that this was very serious issue and requested that the Committee be kept informed of the outcome.
- With regards to concerns about the attitude of workmen employed by Partners to carry out repairs, members were reminded that like any workforce in any industry there will always be some unprofessional personnel, however this may be due to work being subcontracted for lower cost with the result that the quality of work and standard is poor.

The Chair thanked Tom Irvine, Managing Director and members of the public for their attendance.

69

SCRUTINY REVIEW : WITNESS EVIDENCE (HOMELESSNESS) (Item B2)

The Chair invited Ruth Hayes and Stuart Hearne, Co-Directors of the Islington Law Centre to explain their activities and what part they play in alleviating homelessness in Islington. The following points were raised and discussed:

- The meeting was advised that Islington Law Centre (LC) provides low income residents with accessible high quality legal advices to challenge the effects of poverty which is inextricably linked to homelessness. LC in conjunction with statutory agencies, the Local authority, the Islington Strategic Advice Service and BAMER community organisations help to address these issues.
- Through it's partnership working LC is able to provide a range of services to help reduce the risks of housing crises and homelessness and most of its focus and activities are centred around early intervention, welfare benefits and debt

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- LC runs a drop in Reception and Referral service for residents threatened with evictions where they can bring in their correspondence and are assisted in understanding what stage their case is. LC also offers specialist weekly housing advice outreach sessions across the borough; specialist weekly welfare rights and specialist weekly debt advice outreach sessions.
- The Law Centre is funded by Council grants and receives additional funding from both Cripplegate and Cloudesley which is used for follow up casework where needed.
- Residents seek advice on a range of issues such as representations on possession proceedings, homelessness, succession rights, rent arrears, landlord and tenant matters, evictions, anti-social behaviour, rehousing etc
- The Law Centre also provides legal representation to help people avoid possessions, evictions and homelessness which is available through the Clerkenwell and Shoreditch County Court duty scheme. Tenants of different tenures whether Council, housing associations tenants and tenants in private rented sector are supported by LC.
- However, LC clients tend to be Council tenants, only 8% compared of tenants in the private sector compared to 31% council tenants and 46% social landlord tenants seek advice and support.
- Due to increasing overlap between the Law Centre's immigration work and housing need, it is able to offer services to Islington residents through its weekly outreach sessions at the Hackney Migrant Centre.
- With regard to the Council's No Recourse to Public Funds team, the meeting was informed that the Law Centre works with young people to regularise their status so that they are able to access work, education and benefits.
- In light of the introduction of the Universal Credit, LC has been advising people at risk of losing their home, however as its implementation is still in its infancy, LC has yet to be able to analyse the impact, however it will continue to work with the Council on this issue.
- Homelessness is caused by a myriad of factors such as lack of security in the private sector, low income, erratic income, failures of the social security system along with crises such as job loss, ill health or family breakdown.
- In response to a question about the services of Now Medical, representative from the LC advised that the Council should consider the medical assessments made by the individual's GP or consultant as they were most aware of their state of health.
- The meeting was advised that although the Law centre offers pre advice to 8% private tenants, there is no evidence that they were placed in private sector housing by the Council.
- As part of its review into homelessness, the Committee welcomed any anonymised cases that involved any of their clients involvement with NowMedical.
- In response to a question on why local authorities employ the services of Now Medical, the meeting was advised that it offers local authorities another option when taking a decision on housing needs of vulnerable applicants instead of relying on

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GP's opinions. LC representatives expressed concerns that most applicants affected were vulnerable suffering mental illness, learning disability or physical disability.

- A suggestion that the Committee consider scrutinising the Council's use of NowMedical in the future was noted.

The Chair thanked officers of Islington Law Centre for their attendance and contribution to the review..

70 **WORK PROGRAMME 2018/19 (Item B3)** **RESOLVED:**

That the work programme be noted

The meeting ended at 9.45 pm

CHAIR