

London Borough of Islington

**Housing Scrutiny Committee - 12 July 2018**

Minutes of the meeting of the Housing Scrutiny Committee held at Committee Room 1, Town Hall, Upper Street, N1 2UD - Islington Town Hall on 12 July 2018 at 7.30 pm.

**Present:**           **Councillors:**           O'Sullivan (Chair), Gallagher, Hamitouche, Heather, Mackmurdie, O'Halloran, Russell and McDonald

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

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

Apologies were received from Councillors Debono and Lukes.

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

Councillor Nathan substituted for Councillor Lukes.

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

There were no declarations of interest.

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

**RESOLVED:**

That the minutes of the meeting held on 21 June 2018 be confirmed as an accurate record of proceedings and the Chair be authorised to sign them.

**16           CHAIR'S REPORT (Item 5)**

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

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

The order of business would be as per the agenda.

**18           PUBLIC QUESTIONS (Item 7)**

None

**19           FIRE SAFETY ON THE WHITECROSS ESTATE - WITNESS EVIDENCE (Item B1)**

The Committee received verbal evidence from residents on the Whitecross Estate regarding Peabody's response to the fire safety concerns.

The following main points were noted in the discussion:

- The Chair informed the meeting that although the Council had limited amount of influence over Peabody's activities the committee would gather evidence and submit its conclusions to Peabody.
- Committee heard evidence that residents became aware of Peabody's plans to evacuate vulnerable residents only through letters posted through their letter boxes on 11 June 2018 with no specific details as to when it would occur or the reasons. In addition no messages had been left on their landlines or mobile phones, nor had any Peabody personnel immediately attended the tower blocks to explain the

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situation.

- Residents acknowledged that in the last two weeks since the intervention by ward councillors, communication has improved between the landlord and its residents. However, residents had not seen or received correspondence from their Estate Manager
- Peabody's responses and actions regarding safety had caused anxiety not only among elderly and vulnerable residents but able residents especially as further enquiries only resulted in further confusion as Peabody staff had not been briefed or aware of the evacuation plans.
- Members were informed that as fire alarms had not yet been installed in flats, Peabody had installed a Klaxon, an electronic horn in the landings as a further prevention measure in case of any fire outbreaks. In response to a question regarding its misuse, the meeting was informed that the units are monitored by fire marshals so as to avoid any incidents of false alarms.
- Councillor Ward acknowledged that although the Council had taken over the management of the waking watch in the towers, Peabody would cover the costs.
- A resident in describing the state of affairs was concerned that for over 6 days no information had been made available to residents and was alarmed when she walked into the building and noticed a waking watch personnel which then increased over the next few days on all floors.
- A resident was concerned that Peabody having convened a meeting for residents had not offered transport to the venue especially as some of the residents were elderly with different disabilities. In response to a question about the vulnerable residents, the meeting was informed that Peabody had assured Members at the previous meeting of the Committee that they had been in touch with all the vulnerable residents and had been assessed and had Personal Emergency Evacuation Plans.
- With regards to the evacuation time of 15 minutes as suggested by the assessor, residents were concerned that this was not practicable for those residents who were physically disabled and those with mental health issues. The meeting was informed that Peabody had offered to decant the vulnerable residents
- A Member suggested that it would have been appropriate for Peabody to have set up a temporary office within the estate manned by their staff to respond to resident's enquiries and placing a notice in the lobby advising of additional support for vulnerable residents as this would go a long way in alleviating their concerns.
- A resident mentioned that at a residents meeting, they had been informed that during any fire incident, in addition to the Klaxon ringing, waking watch personnel would bang their doors persistently, however it was noticeable that this did not happen during a fire drill and importantly she was concerned that the sound was barely audible in the flats. The meeting was informed that in this instance this was a fire drill solely for the fire wardens and residents were not expected to evacuate.
- A resident suggested to avoid any anxiety among residents, Peabody should communicate better with their residents, not through putting a note through their letter boxes especially as English language may not necessarily be their first

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language and therefore unlikely to understand the gravity of the situation, but their staff should have been knocking on doors, explaining the situation, providing advice and guidance to their residents.

- In response to concerns that Peabody's evacuation plans had not been revealed to residents, and concerns about decanted vulnerable residents living alone in unfamiliar surroundings far from their family ties and access to their GP surgeries, the meeting was informed that assurances had been provided by Peabody that where a decision had been taken to decant, no resident would be made to move outside Bunhill ward where their support network existed.
- A resident was concerned with the handling of the offer of temporary accommodation by the Peabody Lettings team. Residents had been advised that those decanted to temporary accommodation would not be able to take any personal belongings with them. A resident thought that this was insensitive especially as most of the placements were not likely to be short term.
- In response to a question, the meeting was informed that valuable lessons learnt from the experience of the Whitecross estate had put into effect with the management of a similar situation that arose at Prospect House.
- A suggestion for a monthly meeting facilitated by Peabody in Prior Weston School where information could be shared with residents on issues such as the ongoing works and enquiries around scaffolding and insulation was welcomed by residents.
- Councillor Ward expressed thanks to the residents for sharing their experiences, describing Peabody's initial communication with residents on this issue as inadequate and welcomed the improvements that had been put in place by Peabody since the crisis occurred.
- The Committee agreed that the Chair of the Committee in conjunction with the Executive Member for Housing and Development write to Peabody on the findings of the Committee.

### **RESOLVED:**

That the Chair of the Committee in conjunction with the Executive Member for Housing and Development write to Peabody on the Committee's findings.

The meeting ended at 8.30 pm

### **CHAIR**