

London Borough of Islington

**Housing Scrutiny Committee - 8 January 2024**

Minutes of the meeting of the Housing Scrutiny Committee held at Council Chamber on 8 January 2024 at 7.30 pm.

**Present:**      **Councillors:**      Cinko-Oner (Vice-Chair), Graham, Bossman-Quarshie, O'Sullivan, Gilgunn and Jegorovas-Armstrong

**Councillor Conko-Oner in the Chair**

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

Apologies were received from Councillors Jackson and Ozdemir.

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

There were no declarations of substitute members.

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

There were no declarations of interest.

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

**RESOLVED:**

That the minutes of the meeting held on 7 November 2023 be confirmed as an accurate record of proceedings and the Chair be authorised to sign them.

**5      CHAIR'S REPORT (Item 5)**

None

**6      EXTERNAL ATTENDEES (IF ANY) (Item 6)**

None

**7      ORDER OF BUSINESS (Item 7)**

The order of business would be as per the agenda.

**8      PUBLIC QUESTIONS (Item 8)**

None

**9      MAIN SCRUTINY REVIEW 2023/24 -NEW HOMES BUILD IN ISLINGTON: - WITNESS EVIDENCE- TO FOLLOW (Item B1)**

The Chair informed meeting that item is deferred to the next meeting as witness was unavailable.

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**DAMP AND MOULD - OFFICER UPDATE (Item B2)**

Director of Housing Property Services presented the Damp, Condensation and Mould report and draft recommendations and the following issues were raised:

- Members were invited to appraise the work undertaken and offer suggestions of how Council's work in this critical area be improved.
- Additional recommendations is attached for members to adopt, reminding Committee that it has now been a year since the damp and condensation programme was established.
- Online reporting form is in the process of being updated so that residents are empowered to provide more information when reporting damp and mould and officers can assess and triage quickly and more accurately.
- Repairs policy has been revised and updated to include damp, condensation and mould. Policy is due to go through governance and signed off early 2024.
- The One View Dashboard has influenced a new operational dashboard, which enables officers to communicate to a wide audience and to prioritise risk and highlight any gaps.
- Housing Ombudsman has commended Islington's programme and recognised the dedicated work of all involved.
- Tenancy and Property visits pilot has been hugely beneficial in identifying damp and mould in homes, root causes and other repair issues that could lead to damp and mould. A total of 521 households was involved in the pilot and 50 homes had visible damp and mould which were then referred to the Repairs Team.
- Meeting was informed that the Partnership referral form was initially piloted with Andover Medical Practice and will be extended to other medical practices and services.
- Council has a programme in the winter months of proactively testing the performance of boilers and communal heating. Remote monitoring devices which will help identify the increase in humidity in a property so that the repairs team can proactively prevent damp, condensation and mould in homes.
- The Service is working with University College London in conducting a net zero and damp and mould research study to prepare Council for reducing damp and mould and also meeting its net zero aims.
- In response to a question about street properties brought back in house, the Corporate Director informed the meeting that some of the funding of £5m received from the Social Housing Department has been used to insulate street properties within its housing stock.
- With regards to time scale on completing some of the recommendations, the Corporate Director advised that most are in progress at the moment and that these will have to be agreed by the Executive with set deadlines.
- On whether the Council had sufficient funds with regards its relationship with UCL, meeting was reminded that despite the increase of £1m planned investment, the Council will be seeking more funds from central government

- Meeting was advised that funding is available to recruit surveyors noting that presently agency staff is being used prior to the position being filled and trained up and also the Service is looking to train apprentices.
- Over 4000 properties were visited, that the damp and mould team continue to look at trends; that a number of outreach activities were being organised to inform its residents of the process; ongoing work with UCL and capital investment has been allocated.
- Meeting was advised that an update report on the programme will be presented in a future meeting of the Committee.

**RESOLVED:**

That the additional recommendations be agreed.

11 **QUARTERLY REVIEW OF HOUSING PERFORMANCE (Q2 2023/24) (Item B3)**

Corporate Director Homes and Neighbourhoods presented the Quarter 2 Performance Report and the following issues were highlighted:

- 61% of homeless decisions were made in the target frame in Quarter 2, however performance is below the annual target of 80%.
- Service continues to experience a significant increase in demand as homelessness increases across the borough and London as a whole.
- Committee were reminded that in August 2023, London Councils published an article stating that one in 50 Londoners are either homeless or living in temporary accommodation. The increase has stemmed from homeless applicants approaching council due to a combination of domestic abuse, disrepair, lack of private sector housing and cost of living.
- An improvement plan is being implemented in Islington to address the performance noted above, that Service continues to have a weekly focus meeting on performance for this indicator by increasing the officer target for decision reached and provision of overtime for high performing officers to reach decision within the target time frame.
- Meeting was advised that in Quarter 2, 1099 households are in temporary accommodation, that latest government statistics on homelessness in England show that the number of households in temporary accommodation has increased nationally, and that there are homeless households living in temporary accommodation in England than any other time in our history.
- The 50% rise in homelessness is due to a number of factors such as an increase in no-fault evictions in the past year by private landlords, also an estimated 70,000 UK households missed or defaulted on a rent or mortgage payment. It was also noted that one child in every classroom in London is now living in temporary accommodation.
- Although it is well known that the lack of social housing and high rents in private housing is the cause of homelessness, Local councils nationally continue to lobby central government for funding in order to address this issue.
- On the Tenancy Satisfaction Measure, the Corporate Director informed the meeting that although there has been a slight improvement of resident satisfaction of the Service, there is still room for improvement.

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- On the Council's Decent Homes Standard, meeting was advised that performance has improved, that presently only 4% of homes are regarded as non-decent and that when benchmarked against other authorities or housing providers, Islington is performing better than the London median.
- Corporate Director advised that stage 1 complaints has been impacted by recording challenges in quarter 1, however there is ongoing work to improve the data quality of complaints data. In quarter 2, there were 38 per 1000 properties stage 1 complaints raised which is lower than the London median (42.7 per 1000). It was noted that 60% of stage 1 complaints were responded to within timescale which is below the London median of 77%.
- In terms of stage 2 complaints, there were 9.1 complaints raised per 1000 properties which is above the London median. 97% of complaints were responded to within timescale which is above the London median of 49%.
- In response to the omitted indicator measure regarding new build programme, the Corporate Director acknowledged that although not within the responsibility of Homes and Neighbourhood he will ensure that this is included in future quarterly reports.
- On fire and safety checks and disparity performances with other social housing landlords, Corporate Director acknowledged that there is no specific guidance from central government so landlords report it in different ways and at different times.
- With regards to rent arrears, meeting was advised that although the introduction of Universal Credit has resulted in an increase of rent arrears, the Council has introduced some flexibility in particular with vulnerable residents by requesting funds to be paid directly to the Council.
- Gas safety checks are carried out on about 98% of its housing stock within one month of notification, that in the few instances that access into properties is not possible Council will apply to court however this can be a long drawn out process.
- On the omission of KPI in the report regarding electricity safety checks, the Corporate Director indicated that this will be included in future reports.
- On the issue about addressing complaints which is costing the Council huge sums, the Executive Member reiterated the need for residents to avoid scams and schemes pretending to act on their behalf, that the Council continuously reminds its residents to contact the Council directly or use its dedicated email address.
- In response to a question about homelessness, the Director acknowledged that the Council receives 298 housing applications and are approached from residents who live outside the borough as they have historical ties to residents in the borough. The Director reiterated that currently the Council has the lowest rough sleepers in the borough in comparison to neighbouring boroughs.
- Council is seeking to buy back 'Right to Buy' (RTB) properties to address homelessness and that on the issue of 'sofa surfing' where possible the Council will provide advice and support when they approach the Council. Meeting was advised that the Council is reaching out to leaseholders interested in selling, that they will be offered the ongoing market rate.

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- In addition to the above, the Corporate Director noted that government has announced more funding for local authorities to buy back 'RTB' properties which is to be welcomed however the solution is to build more social housing and support private renters.
- Meeting was advised that all health and safety checks carried out by Council officers are independently checked.
- Home Office has suspended its 7 day eviction notice which has increased homelessness and put a lot of pressure on local authorities. Corporate Director advised that Council do not use Bed & Breakfast type of accommodation but put families in self-contained type of accommodation with facilities to cook.
- In response to a question, meeting was advised that the Temporary Accommodation Policy which was adopted at Executive in July 2023 be on the agenda for the next meeting.
- On the issue of under occupiers the Executive Member acknowledged the challenge especially in light of the cost of living crisis and will be looking at increasing the present threshold amount of £5,000.

### **RESOLVED:**

That the report be noted

That the policy on Temporary Accommodation be considered at the next meeting

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### **HOUSING OMBUDSMAN ACTION PLAN UPDATE (Item B4)**

The Corporate Director of Homes and Neighbourhood provided an update on the progress of the Housing Ombudsman Action Plan.

- Housing Ombudsman concluded their special investigation into Islington Council in October 2023, Council accepted the findings and confirmed its commitment to service improvement on publication of the report.
- Draft Action Plan has been shared with committee at last meeting and that work has commenced on delivering the Action plan as well as refining it.
- Corporate Director, Homes and Neighbourhoods will be meeting the Housing Ombudsman later in January to discuss progress and their plans to monitor arrangements following their Special Investigation report.
- Meeting was advised that although the Council has been commended on its proactive approach to remedying areas identified for improvement, work had commenced prior to launch of the investigation.
- Action Plan has been developed to respond to the 21 recommendations and work has commenced on delivering the action plan.
- Report sets out the progress that has been made under the 4 areas , disrepair (including damp and mould), anti-social behaviour and complaints handling.
- Action plan contains 81 actions in response to the 21 recommendations, that of the 83 actions , 21 have been completed or are in place already.
- It is important to note that some of the actions in the Action plan are cross cutting between different partners or services, that it is important to note that the Council has developed a departmental format for action plans which

ensures SMART objectives and Senior Responsible Officers are in place for all action. Also a staff survey has been designed for implementation during December and January to seek feedback on staff empowerment and support staff.

- In terms of disrepair recommendations amongst a number of actions, the Council has introduced a backstop team to prevent missed appointments through reallocations processes, a damp and mould team in place with specific timeframe measures so as to help isolate and monitor service performance.
- In addition to the above, additional checks are in place for complex repairs delivered by Partners and annual performance reporting through Housing Management Team and Political Leadership meetings.
- Partners are working proactively with the Council to imbed changes into their service arrangements and incorporating updated policies and processes.
- In terms of Anti-social Behaviour recommendations, the Council has carried out a self -assessment against the Housing Ombudsman 'Time to be Heard' insight report and an action plan has been developed.
- With regards to complaints related recommendations which focusses on the Council's need to improve, the meeting was advised that Council has developed a complaints handling programme utilising the Housing Ombudsman online training courses for all office-based staff, to be rolled out in February.
- Meeting was advised that a new complaints reporting format is now in place and is consistent across all Homes and Neighbourhood teams.
- Homes and Neighbourhoods complaint service restructure has been agreed with additional resources secured for the team which ensures that quality management remains at the heart of the service. The restructure process will be rolled out in late January for staff consultation and where needed posts recruited too, once the consultation process is concluded.
- The Corporate Complaints Team will ensure that apology letters are brought to the attention of complaints leads and the Chief Executive so as to ensure visibility and compliance with the Housing Ombudsman's expectation and stage 2 letters will be signed off by a senior officer.
- In response to a question, the Corporate Director acknowledged that the Action Plan was not appended on its report and will circulate it.
- Meeting was advised that RSL's are subjected to the same regulation and that Council's have reached out to other providers that have been issued with the Paragraph 49 Investigations.

**RESOLVED:**

That the Action plan be circulated ahead of the meeting as noted above.

- 13 **WORK PROGRAMME 2023/24 (Item B5)**  
In response to a suggestion for the Committee to look into scaffolding and to include it in the work programme as it is an issue noticeable in member's case work raised by residents, meeting was reminded that a previous review into scaffolding was carried out a number of years ago which made a number of recommendations. This report should be circulated to committee.

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The Executive Member acknowledged residents concern about scaffolding and the length of period that scaffolding remains in place and suggesting members to forward individual cases to her and it will be looked into.

In response to a query on anti-social behaviour, meeting was reminded that this lies within the remit of the Council's Policy and Performance Scrutiny Committee which is currently undertaking a review into the issue and likely to be completed in the spring with recommendations .

### **RESOLVED:**

That the work programme be noted

To include the topic of scaffolding on the committee's work programme

The meeting ended at 9.15 pm

**CHAIR**