

Homes and Communities Scrutiny Committee - 7 November 2024

Minutes of the meeting of the Homes and Communities Scrutiny Committee held at Council Chamber, Town Hall, Upper Street, N1 2UD on 7 November 2024 at 7.30 pm.

Present: **Councillors:** Jackson (Chair), McHugh (Vice-Chair), Gilgunn, Mackmurdie, North, O'Sullivan, Graham, Cinko-Oner and Donaghey

Councillor Jason Jackson in the Chair

39 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Item A1)

Apologies were received from Co-optee Rose McDonald.

40 DECLARATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (Item A2)

There were no declarations of substitute members.

41 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (Item A3)

There were no declarations of interest.

42 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING (Item A4)

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 14 October 2024 be confirmed as an accurate record of proceedings and the Chair be authorised to sign them.

43 CHAIR'S REPORT (Item A5)

None

44 PUBLIC QUESTIONS (Item A6)

None

45 MAIN SCRUTINY REVIEW - ISLINGTON COMMUNITY CENTRES - WITNESS EVIDENCE (Item B1)

Lorna Hughes informed meeting that Committee will receive a range of experiences of community centre managers, noting that Islington has a mixed economy of community centres in the borough ,3 of which are directly managed by the Council and some run by voluntary organisations and volunteer committees.

Committee received evidence from, Elaine Maffret of Hilldrop Community Centre, Colin Adams of Brickworks, Doris Hester of Goodinge Community Centre and Dirk Lampe of Vibast Community Centre.

Elaine Maffret of Hilldrop Community Centre informed Committee of the workings and best practices.

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- In the last five years, turnover has doubled from about 117,000 to 213,000 and that's through the pandemic.
- 50% of the centre's income comes from funding, half of which is used for After School Club and holiday play schemes.
- It cost about £100,000 a year to run the centre half of which used to come from funding although presently down to about 32%, and the rest is from fees received from parents, which is subsidized.
- The Centre employs 12 people on the equivalent of five full time posts, 6 of which work in the play projects, the other six in the core centre administrative centre including the manager, a cleaner and a cook for Thursday lunch club.
- The Centre's turnover goes on staff salaries, with very little left over for activities. Centre does receive grant from the Voluntary and Community sector and community Partnerships team. The other 50% is self-generated through hall hires charges.
- The Centre is reliant on volunteers for most of the activities, one volunteer cooks for the Tuesday food hub and others supports residents with issues around the cost of living, isolation, elderly people on their local estates.
- Elaine was of the view that the remaining 45 community centres should not be referred to as community centres but community spaces as some of them are just an empty room on the estate, noting that a community centre caters and delivers for the whole community of all ages a wide variety of services, activities and support.
- With regards to the state of the building, the Manager reminded members that in the last five years £350,000 was spent in investment, received via community infrastructure levies, to improve things around the centre, reminding members that was originally a pub and only recently had its original doors replaced with fire doors.
- Approximately over 500 people in a week come through the Centre for the different services and organisations such as the Bengali women's group, the Alcoholics Anonymous, the Ukulele group etc use the building regularly.
- It was noted that Hilldrop community centre was once a Council Community Centre, that until 2016 most were being managed by the voluntary and community sector, noting that Islington has got a strong voluntary and community sector when you looking at models of good practice.
- Islington works with a unique body in London called the Octopus community network who don't manage centres but operate as a support network for VCS, noting that without their services and activities Hilldrop would not have survived the pandemic.
- Hilldrop is a strategic neighbourhood hub, has good relationship with the community partnerships team, also works with Council departments such as electoral services during elections for polling stations, registered as emergency centres on estates. Officers from Children Services and Health Services do hold events in the centres.
- Hilldrop has a website that highlights all the services it offers.

Colin Adams who has managed Brickworks since 2010 raised the following issues.

- Meeting was advised that through its collaborative and partnership working £2.5 million has been brought into the borough of the last few years.
- Brickworks has been in existence for nearly 20 years and recently relocated to new building six years ago as part of the housing project.
- The centre is open seven days a week from 8am-9pm and sometimes beyond normal times depending on bookings.
- The centre has 3 tenants, a community nursery which works with parent of low income, employment agency to assist in addressing poverty cycle. There is an employment agency that's pan London which employs about 150 local people.
- 50% of the Centre's income is generated through rent and higher charges and presently has 4 reception staff, three working in after school club, two members

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working at play groups, one staff working two days a week, a working cleaner, a manager and full-time administrator.

- Without the 10 volunteers, the centre would struggle to exist as we have some that support food banks.
- Volunteers are appreciated not only for identifying a community need but support it by taking the lead for example providing knitting and special isolation classes. The centre offers tranquil workshops for elderly residents who don't go out.
- Brickworks started in 1972, when 10 residents took it over within the estate as an arm to school club.
- In 2011 there was an overspend of between £47,000 and £69,000, however recovery started in 2012 with profit by 2014. Brickwork moved into the new building in 2018 and with the pandemic things changed with expenditure rising once again.
- With regards the state of the building, meeting was advised that centre is enjoyed by users however the inability to control heating and lighting for a long time especially in light of the challenging high utility bills, noting that it is now being addressed.
- The centre is well utilised by the Brownie Girls guides, council events such as recycling, cost of living, corporate away days, used as polling centres, registered as emergency centres and also community safety events which are attended by the Police especially as there is a significant increase in anti-social behaviour. The centre hosts citizen advice bureau who provide advice to residents on a range of issues.

Dirk Lampe, Manager of Vibast Community Centre highlighted the following issues:

- Vibast Community Centre has a fairly new building in Bunhill ward, is a successor building to the Redbrick Community Centre in 2019 as part of the council's new building programme. The Centre has a fairly big hall for large gatherings or events, 2 small meeting room for a 1-1 meeting.
- During the pandemic in 2019, the building was shut down and handed over to the NHS as a Covid centre and handed back for it to resume its activities in late 2022.
- The aim of the centre is to provide vibrant programmes that serve the local people. It presently has 2 full time staff and open 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday. It is occasionally opened late evenings and weekend when necessary.
- Vibast is not reliant on VCS for funding like other community centres in the borough and with the aid of 5 volunteers it is able to undertake a number of activities.
- Vibast does run some events directly but mostly have other providers who come in and use the space for their activities who pay some fees.
- It was noted that over half of the providers who use the centre pay nothing as they have no funding and run activities for free for the community.
- Meeting was informed that the centre is at about 83% capacity with all the spaces fully taken up.
- From April to October 2024, the Centre has had over 1100 separate bookings, 30-40 regular hires and over 1000 people come through the door.
- Vibast forms partnership or form links with groups that provide activities that are beneficial and useful to the community and bring their own funding. Hirers welcome the flexible use of the space.
- The Centre generates its income from hire fees which is put towards its running costs and other activities like Zumba classes

Doris Hestor of Goodinge Community Centre highlighted a few points:

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- The Centre commenced in a dilapidated building with an average of 800 people per month coming through the door to use their services. Centre was given a new building.
- Covid had a huge impact as the centre lost a number of volunteers during the pandemic and has now built it up self up.
- Meeting was informed that no funding is received that volunteering is key to its success in the community. The Centre has a lunch club on Monday supported by Goodinge with users paying a little amount to cover their lunches.
- In recent years, the centre's 2 relatively small halls are utilised to its full capacity with over 200-300 people in attendance every week.
- The Community has only £26,000 and spend £14,000.
- Members of the public are able to use the Centre's computers to access Council services and also use facilities such as the photocopier and bathroom showers.
- In response to how the centres measure their performance, meeting was advised besides receiving regular feedback from users of the centre, centre as part of their funding criteria have to submit 6 monthly report and also services are evaluated by the providers.
- Meeting was advised that most of the services/activities held in community centres are evidence based.
- On what other services which community centres would like to undertake, meeting was informed of a greater need for dementia groups, out of school clubs not for working mothers but mothers who are not working and for community centres to be treated like tenants when reporting repairs.
- In response to a question on siting of community centres in Islington, meeting was advised that they are sited within the range of council estates for example, Hilldrop Community centre is within the Tufnell Park area, one of the densely populated 8 housing estates, while Brickwork covers Tollington ward.
- In terms of democracy, some of the community centres have ward councillors as co-optee's.
- A suggestion for the involvement of ward councillors when the Committee undertakes its fact finding exercise visiting community centre was noted especially as they are in a better place to appreciate their community assets.
- Meeting was advised that there is co working relationship between community centres, that cleaning contracts are shared, meetings are held regularly, joint bids for National Lottery funds to address health inequalities led to £750,000 etc.
- Meeting was informed that during Covid, the community centres were able to support a network of food bank because it had a network in place of volunteers
- Also there is a weekly newsletter where information, good practices is shared and training is offered for those interested in community organising where they volunteers acquire skills that will hold them in good stead.
- The centres have good partnership with Council officers in particular public health which serves to bring in skills and huge benefit to the community it serves.
- In response to a question on what area that community centres will require support, it was stated that in the area of training volunteers as centres cannot afford to individually train volunteers.

The Chair thanked all in attendees, welcoming their input, stating that members will be undertaking a number of visits to some of the community centres, an opportunity for members to speak to the users and residents.

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ISLINGTON COUNCIL'S APPROACH TO TENANCY FRAUD (Item B2)

Sinem Yinak, Assistant Director, Housing Management and Stephanie Toghill, Head of Housing Investigations presented a report on Islington's Council approach to Tenancy Fraud. The following points were noted :-

- As a follow up to the previous meeting, Committee is receiving a detailed report on Council's approach to Housing Fraud.
- With regards to tenancy fraud within housing associations, meeting was advised of recent changes, that it now retains the nomination to properties that it recovers which is over and above nomination rights that are in place with Housing Need and Housing Allocation, where previously council will charge a fee to undertake investigations.
- Right to Buy applications are thoroughly assessed and checks are carried on rent arrears and council tax to ensure that no fraud is being committed.
- It was noted that although income has increased as a result of recovering rent arrears, more work is being undertaken by the Income team as Council recognises that this is essential so as to ensure the Council it can be used for its residents going forward.
- Islington's Specialist team is unique in comparison to other authorities as it is under the Housing Directorate rather than the Corporate Fraud Team and this enables the Council a more holistic approach when it comes to housing management issues such as ASB breaches and rent arrears.
- There has been a major push from the investigation team in trying to raise awareness of tenancy fraud both internally and externally which has resulted in an increase in referral for example the recovery of £264,056 through illegal subletting.
- Tenancy fraud is noticeable in short- term letting which has a detrimental effect and officers are working hard to clamp down on these activities and is presently involved in a pilot which will address this issue.
- Officers recognise fraud of different types and are resolute to instances that involve organised criminal activities and are sensitive with cases that have some element of safeguarding and succession. Each case is investigated thoroughly with a view of retrieving homes that are being sublet illegally and allocated to those residents on the housing register.
- Meeting was advised that appeals of succession cases are dealt with by the Head of the Investigations team as stipulated by the Housing Allocation procedure. In terms of refusal rate of succession applications, meeting was advised that this information will be provided at a future meeting.
- On the issue of leaseholder and increase in council tax for a non-residential lease, the Corporate Director advised that clarification would be sought with the finance team for a written response which will be sent onto members.
- In response to a question on the existence of any comparison data of tenancy fraud between the Council and Housing Association, Manager advised that there is no consistent recording in existence as they are not regulated at all.
- Meeting was advised that due to some good ongoing work, some housing associations have been able to recover over 170 properties noting that Regulator of Social Housing is being lobbied to ensure that it is high on the agenda nationally.
- With regards to Airbnb and short letting, meeting was advised of it being a high risk area in that obtaining evidence of fraud is only possible through a court order as there are data protection rules.
- The Chair thanked officers and the Housing Team for their good work, noting that the press had picked up the good news.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted.

47

PROPERTY LICENSING 6 MONTHLY UPDATE (Item B3)

Bez Atsebaha, Director of Community Safety, Security and Resilience updated the Committee on the Property Licensing scheme. The following points were highlighted:

- In terms of performance of the Private Rented Sector (PRS) , council received over 7,500 property licensing scheme applications since the scheme started in January 2020.
- Since April 2024, Council has received 1500 applications of the new selective scheme for Tollington, Hill Rise and Finsbury park since May 2024.
- On the issue of Revenue received, meeting was advised that in the last 2 quarters Council has received over £1m to administer licenses and processes in Islington.
- With regards to processing of licenses, meeting was advised that there has been a significant reduction to 58 days in comparison to 100 days due to a new group manager being employed who is giving clear guidance to the team.
- In terms of licensing inspection, meeting was informed that officers are carrying out 145 inspections every month in comparison to less than 60.
- Meeting was informed that a lot of enforcement ongoing that recently group managers found 257 unregistered properties, that more work needs to be done in terms of education, engagement and then enforcement to ensure that more properties are brought into the scheme.
- Staff are being trained on civil penalty civil procedures and are now issuing more penalty notices to those not abiding and improving living conditions within the private rented sector. The Section has improved its engagement and communication by employing a tenant and landlord engagement officer running drop in session for private renters and landlords.
- Meeting was also notified that the website has improved with FAQ being provided. It was noted that the platform for the licensing application is user friendly, noting that there is a phone line for residents to call in and receive support. Also the tenant and landlord engagement is also supporting tenant and landlords with online application.
- With regard the 285 Private housing requests over the last 2 quarters , meeting was advised that more could be done in this area and there should be an improvement with the recent employment of an officer on the 3 months.
- On the low civil penalty notices issued, meeting was advised that although enforcement is key it is still important that Council explore the route of education, then engagement, that enforcement should be the last resort.
- On the 74% of landlords not being accredited, officer advised that since the last meeting in July the figures have gone up to 24% from 19%, that the Council will continue on the engagement route so as to increase the accreditation and that this issue will continue to be monitored.
- On the possibility of extending the selective licensing to other wards in the borough, the Assistant Director advised that a report is scheduled for Executive seeking consultation, that a lot of modelling is being undertaken and officers will be looking at data to determine if more wards could be included to the new scheme. Feedback from the consultation exercise will be shared with the committee in 2025.

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- The Executive Member for Housing Needs reiterated that although there is a preference for a borough wide scheme, it should be noted that approval is by the Secretary of State after meeting all the necessary requirements.
- The Chair thanked Director for the update on the licensing scheme, noting that there is scope for the scheme to be expanded nationwide especially in light of the new central government direction on this issue and that Council should endeavour to incentivise landlords who are yet to be accredited by improving an offer and not await central government. Chair reminded meeting that the scheme should not be viewed as a means of generating revenue but improving conditions for those renters in private sector accommodation.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted

48

LIBRARIES PERFORMANCE REPORT - TO FOLLOW (Item B4)

Committee received a performance report relating to Quarter 1 and 2 which was presented by Councillor Chapman, Executive Member for Equalities, Communities and Inclusion and Michelle Gannon, Head of Libraries. The following points were highlighted:

- Visitor figures attending libraries in Islington for the above period are slightly above target, that there is an upward trend since reopening after the pandemic. Although not back to pre-covid figures yet but this is being looked into going forward.
- The corporate indicator aims to highlight the breadth of the library offer and the uptake of online and e-resources. The issues here show the take-up of a number of resources: e-books; e-audio books; e-newspapers and e-magazines that users can access via Libby, Borrowbox and other library apps.
- It was noted that the increase in take up of online issues reflects the growing popularity of e-resources and how users' needs have changed. With performance strong in the first 2 quarters, it is projected to be above that of 23/24. This increase in online use may potentially affect visitor figures as users no longer need to visit to select items. This increase in online use may potentially affect visitor figures too libraries as users no longer need to visit to select items.
- Although all libraries offer public computers and Wi-Fi which are free to use, it is noticeable that visitors use their own their devices and plug into the Council's libraries. As a result the Council is reducing the number of computers as they are not being used however still retain some for those residents who need to access council online services and for training offers for adults.
- Over the past 10 years there has been a noticeable reduction in the demand for PCs as more people have their own devices and broadband at home and only use the space in the libraries to access free wi-fi on tablets, phones and other devices.
- In 2011/12 usage of PCs was approximately 60% take up of all available pc hours. By 2023/24 this dropped to 25%.
- Going forward as we refurbish libraries and budgets allow, we will be look to reduce the number of public PCs and increase the number of spaces for library users to use their own devices.
- The PC booking system provides detailed reports on the uptake of the public PCs, with usage currently standing at approximately 25% take up of all available sessions overall.

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- The Libraries Service has developed a range of activities that engage with local people through offer bespoke and themed activities throughout the year and has a network of partners who have a range of regular activities.
- Following Digital Services decision to change the Council's wifi, data is now available to monitor the number of users logging into the system. This will be incorporated into future quarterly reports.
- In response to a question on Equality Impact Assessment and the intention to develop an even stronger offer that addresses the inequalities by mapping an offer to need and addressing gaps, meeting was advised by Executive member that this is part of a broader piece of work that the Council is undertaking noting the Council's Equality and Inclusion Strategy 2021 which is to be refreshed , that this will be shared with the Committee in the new municipal year.
- In response to concerns that removal of computers will affect residents not being able to access online council services, meeting was advised that some units will still be left, that following covid, data shows a fall in use.
- It was noted that although most council services are accessible online, every attempt is made to publicise the use of computers in the library especially for those who do not have devices. Officers advertise and promote the availability of computers in libraries through different organisations such as DWP, Children Centres and Community Centres.
- Islington Libraries offer 1-1 support for those who lack basic IT skills such as opening email and browsing on the internet and signpost residents to ACL and accredited courses. The Libraries also offer gadget workshops where people are taught how to use devices and the libraries work with other organisations to support their gadget workshops held in community centres.
- The Library Wifi services are advertised via leafletting, placed in community services and GP and also use other organisations such as Octopus. More work needs to be done regarding translating into other languages.

The Chair welcomed the report, reminding that future reports will be incorporate more details as noted above.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted

49

HOUSING PASSENGER LIFTS UPDATE (Item B5)

Committee received an update on the Housing Estate Passenger Lifts – presented by Matt West, Service Director, Housing Property Services, Wesley Carlisle-Goldthorpe, Group Leader Capital Programme and The following issues were raised:

- The Director advised meeting that Council is in a good place, noting that the low TMS(Tenant Management Satisfaction) indicator with regards the lift safety that was reported at the last meeting was due to an issue with one of the contractor . This has now been resolved by bringing a new contractor and now it is up from 95% to 100%.
- Meeting was reminded that despite the challenges including an aged lift stock, the availability of lifts to residents has remained consistently at **95% or higher** over the last 24 months.

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- An asset programme has been put together by the team to identify which of the lifts to be replaced, that £12m of works is envisaged to be undertaken in the next 2 years and a 5 year programme that will identify the priority lifts.
- Council recognises the impact on residents when lifts breakdown, that processes have been put in place to supporting residents and informing ward councillors.
- In response to concerns raised by Internal audit and its recommendations, meeting was advised that the Housing Safety and Compliance Team considers it has fully implemented all but 1 of the Internal Audit recommendations, which will not be taken forward as it is impractical and offers limited benefit.
- In terms of capital works, focus is to replace the worst performing lift within the 5 year programme and the good news is that works has commenced on sites.
- Meeting was assured that despite the challenges compliance remains at 100%. It was noted that although there have been additional cost to the Council due to the engagement of the support Contractor, noting that although any additional expenditure is unwelcome, the additional costs incurred are considered reasonable in the context of legal compliance, the TSM/BSM standards and ultimately, resident safety.
- It was noted that Amalgamated Lifts are not currently performing to the Councils expectation or contractual requirements, in respect of remedial works and include work arising from LOLER inspections, other safety related checks (SAFed) and issues arising from the quality assurance process and that they are currently on a Performance Improvement Plan (PIP), which is being monitored closely by the lift service and the Contracts Team in Housing Property Service.
- Due to the age of the passenger lift stock, Amalgamated Lifts are experiencing difficulties in sourcing replacement components for some older lifts, and this is likely to continue to increase over time.
- In response to a question, meeting was advised that it is likely however that older lifts which require replacement parts may take longer to return to service, although not currently reflected in the statistics.
- Meeting was informed of the current works on site and the value, Harvist Estate, 8 lifts at a value of £3,400,656.00, St. Luke's Estate, 8 lifts at a value of £1,769,250.00 and Conrad House and Beckford House to the tune of £1,102,754.66.
- In response to a question, the Director advised that start on site for works to tall blocks is subject to BSR (Building Safety Regulator) approval which is a new requirement to obtain BSA approval for works to tall blocks, noting that it is significantly increasing the timelines to get lift works on site
- In terms of lift replacement, priorities are based on Service repair history, condition survey undertaken by a specialist in house lift engineer prior to undertaking works; peer review of proposed works by Group Leader and priority schedules which are continually re assessed pending feedback from repairs department.
- In terms of compliance, quality Control and Health & Safety, meeting was advised that this is established at pre-tender stage and managed throughout the life cycle of the cycle, first of all the contractor submits the detailed design for client review / comment prior to commencement of works, then Islington's in-house lift engineers review the contractors design for compliance with the performance specification, after which the installing contractor undertake their own quality control, compliance and Health & Safety in accordance with the requirements of the Islington contract.
- As part of the process, the lift engineer inspects and verifies quality control and compliance at 1st fix, 2nd fix and at the commissioning stage.
- In response to a question, meeting was advised that prior to commencement of work the Building Safety Regulator (BSR) reviews all installation designs at preconstruction stage and in terms of tall buildings according to Building Safety Act 2022, the Council is required under BSA to submit all completed works records for quality control management to the BSR.

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- The Chair thanked officers for their work, reminding officers to forward the specific figures which officers were not able to provide.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted

- 50** **WORK PROGRAMME 2024/25 (Item B6)**
With regard to the report on Council's proposed plans communal heating hours, the Acting Corporate Director advised that the report will be circulated to Committee ahead as next meeting is scheduled in January .

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted

The meeting ended at 9.50 pm

CHAIR