

London Borough of Islington

Housing Scrutiny Committee - 17 October 2016

Minutes of the meeting of the Housing Scrutiny Committee held at Committee Room 4, Town Hall, Upper Street, N1 2UD on 17 October 2016 at 7.30 pm.

Present: **Councillors:** O'Sullivan (Chair), Erdogan, Gantly, Hamitouche and O'Halloran.

Resident Rose-Marie McDonald and Jim Rooke
Observers:

Also present: Councillor Diarmaid Ward

Councillor Michael O'Sullivan in the Chair

216 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Item A1)

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Gary Doolan, Marian Spall and Angela Picknell.

Councillor Aysegul Erdogan submitted apologies for lateness.

217 DECLARATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (Item A2)

None.

218 DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS (Item A3)

None.

219 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING (Item A4)

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 6 September 2016 be confirmed as a correct record and the Chair be authorised to sign them.

220 CHAIR'S REPORT (Item A5)

The Chair advised that representatives of Family Mosaic Housing Association had been invited to present to the Committee under Item B1, RSL Scrutiny, however unfortunately they were not available to attend the meeting. Family Mosaic would be invited to a future meeting.

It was advised that Jon Farrant, Head of Tenancy and Estate Services, had been due to give evidence to the Committee under Item B2, Housing Services for Vulnerable People:

Witness Evidence, however unfortunately he was unable to attend the meeting. It was noted that Jon Farrant would attend the next meeting.

The Chair highlighted recent casework received from Hyde Housing Association tenants. It was commented that residents were anxious about the organisation's review of community centres, and it was suggested that the organisation should provide all stakeholders with further information about the review.

221 ORDER OF BUSINESS (Item A6)

No changes were proposed to the order of business.

222 PUBLIC QUESTIONS (Item A7)

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

223 RSL SCRUTINY (Item B1)

The Committee noted apologies from Family Mosaic Housing Association. The item was deferred to a future meeting.

224 HOUSING SERVICES FOR VULNERABLE PEOPLE: WITNESS EVIDENCE (Item B2)

The Committee received a presentation from Cora Nicholls, Housing Options Manager, and Vicky Manser, Principal Re-Housing Manager, on the work of the Housing Needs service in supporting vulnerable people.

The following main points were noted in the discussion:

- There were around 20,000 households on the housing register, but only around 1,200 properties available to let each year. Around 9,000 households were in housing need, with almost 5,000 applicants in overcrowded housing.
- The Housing Needs team provided advice to residents on their housing options. Information was available from the council's website, and also directly from the municipal offices at 222 Upper Street. The service provided 'floor walkers' at the municipal offices to assist vulnerable people who may have difficulty accessing the computer terminals.
- Residents could apply for council housing online, with their application instantly assessed against the council's allocations scheme. The form was designed to be accessible in different languages and to those needing different text sizes.
- The council operated a 'choice based lettings' scheme in which households were able to bid for properties suitable for their needs. The eight bidders with the highest number of points were invited to view the property. It was advised that vulnerable people, such as those with mobility issues, were able to visit the property for a second time. The council offered a more flexible service to these residents.
- The Housing Needs service worked in partnership with area housing offices, social services, the Police, and other agencies such as Age UK to discuss vulnerable tenants in order to better understand their particular housing needs.
- The service had a positive working relationship with the Islington Learning Disabilities Partnership and discussed cases with them monthly. Applicants with a learning disability could qualify for supported housing, or those with a lower level learning disability could be supported in their own home through the KeyRing service. The KeyRing service helped those with learning disabilities to maintain their tenancies by providing floating support. This included helping to develop their

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independence by providing support with budgeting, repairs, personal safety, and life skills such as cookery.

- The Housing Needs service had developed a housing options booklet and tenancy agreement in an easy read format for those who struggled with written English.
- The service worked with support organisations such as Centre 404 to provide supported housing projects to those with high and complex needs.
- The Housing Needs service reported a good relationship with both Adult and Children's Social Services. Vulnerable people's housing options were discussed with support workers to find the most suitable housing available. Advice surgeries were also held with vulnerable families.
- Two officers were appointed as GP link workers. It was reported that lots of valuable information was received from GPs which helped vulnerable people to access housing; particularly vulnerable people who were not known to the council.
- The housing bidding system had been developed with vulnerable people in mind. The website indicated if the property had been adapted or was wheelchair accessible. The website was intended to be easy to use.
- It was known that around 5% of those on the housing waiting list could not access the internet to bid for properties, and these tended to be vulnerable people. In such instances the system was able to automatically bid on properties on their behalf, if details of preferred areas and types of property were provided.
- There were 651 supported accommodation spaces across the borough and these were allocated with the Supported Accommodation Referrals Team.
- The council's Floating Support team helped to manage vulnerable people's tenancies and prevent homelessness. Around 2,000 households a year accessed the service.
- The council's planning policies required new homes to be built to a 'lifetime homes' standard, meaning they would be adaptable if tenants developed mobility issues in the future. There was also a requirement for 10% of new homes to be wheelchair accessible.
- A member queried if it was easy for vulnerable people to obtain the 120 points required to bid for housing. In response, it was advised that many vulnerable people were able to qualify for additional points due to medical need. Applications were reviewed by the council's independent medical adviser and either 40, 80, or 150 points could be awarded depending on the severity of the resident's condition. Additional points could also be awarded to tenants with other vulnerabilities, such as having young children, or those facing other risks.
- Following a query, it was confirmed that the children of leaseholders were not eligible for the 'next generation' scheme, which awarded additional points to the children of council tenants.
- A member provided an example of a vulnerable family living in unsuitable housing, however had not been able to successfully bid for a property, despite having over 220 points. Whilst officers could not comment on individual cases, it was known that housing need exceeded supply.
- Following a question, it was confirmed that the council had one independent medical officer, who was a qualified GP. Those with medical conditions were assessed against the council's lettings scheme. There was no standard points award for residents with cancer, the medical officer instead assessed how the cancer affected the resident's housing need.
- Although residents' GPs or consultants sometimes provided letters in support of an application, this was not encouraged. It was advised that all medical matters were considered by the independent medical officer, who would contact other medical professionals if further information was needed.

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- It was advised that additional points were available for residents living in overcrowded conditions; this included needing extra bedrooms, and opposite sex overcrowding, where males and females aged over 10 had to share a bedroom.
- If it was thought that a vulnerable family needed rehousing, the Housing Needs team would liaise with social services and the child's school to assess the risks to the family. The service also worked with early help services such as Families First.
- The Committee appreciated the importance of building to the 'lifetime homes' standard, commenting on the difficulties of adapting some older properties and the risks associated with staying in unsuitable housing.
- A member commented that vulnerable people often felt that they needed to reiterate their needs to housing providers; for example, those who are deaf would not hear the doorbell to open the door to repairs operatives. It was queried how the council identified the needs of vulnerable people. In response, it was advised that Housing worked closely with social services and other organisations, such as the Citizens Advice Bureau, to identify the needs of tenants.
- It was advised that the council would face an even greater shortage in properties as a result of national housing policy changes and in future mutual exchange may be the most effective way to move property. Mutual exchange surgeries were held at the municipal offices and there was a dedicated officer to support tenants seeking a mutual exchange.
- Following a question, it was advised that voids were refurbished to meet health and safety standards before being re-let and officers would advise of the works to be carried out when prospective tenants visited the property. It was suggested that tenants should be provided with a written list to confirm the works to be carried out before they accepted the property, as this would clarify expectations and help vulnerable tenants' and their carers to assess the suitability of a property.
- A member commented on the poor condition of some properties, indicating that some tenants had turned down street properties due to their condition and unsuitability for vulnerable people. It was suggested that the council's website sometimes needed clearer information on accessibility and the condition of the property. Officers advised that they were working to improve the quality of information received from Area Housing Offices.

The Committee thanked Cora Nicholls and Vicky Manser for their attendance.

225 QUARTER 1 PERFORMANCE REPORT (Item B3)

The report was introduced by Councillor Diarmaid Ward, Executive Member for Housing and Development, and Sean McLaughlin, Corporate Director of Housing and Adult Social Services.

The following main points were noted in the discussion:

- This was the first quarterly performance report submitted to the Housing Scrutiny Committee. Corporate performance indicators were previously reported to the Policy and Performance Scrutiny Committee, however it had been agreed that quarterly performance should be reported to the appropriate review committee instead.
- Several affordable housing schemes were behind schedule. As these were being developed privately, the council had very little influence over their progress.
- Concern was expressed at the increase in homeless acceptances in quarter one, however it was thought that this would decrease slightly in quarter two.
- Repairs satisfaction was reported to be 94%, which was considered very high.

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- The government's requirement for the council to sell housing stock would significantly decrease the council's ability to re-house vulnerable people. It was expected that increasing the use of temporary accommodation would be an unavoidable consequence. The Committee was very concerned by the impact of national housing policy changes. It was noted that the implementation of secondary legislation under the Housing and Planning Act had been delayed.
- It was clarified that rent arrears had increased to 1.8%, which was only a 0.1% increase, and not by 1.8% as indicated in the report. However, officers were investigating this increase, as 0.1% represented over £100,000 of lost income.
- It was queried why the implementation of the new repairs ICT system had been delayed until April 2017. In response, it was advised that there had been developmental delays and it was not appropriate to implement a new system over winter, which was the busiest time of year for the repairs service. Difficult conversations had taken place with the supplier and officers thought that the revised implementation date would be met.
- In response to a query, it was advised that the council did evict families from time to time, however this was a last resort and Children's Social Care were always involved in decisions where children would be affected. No families had been evicted as a result of the bedroom tax, and evictions often took place following repeated non-payment and refusal of advice and support.
- The Committee raised concerns with Partners' repairs performance. It was commented that Partners' outstanding repairs were not part of the historic backlog, which had been cleared.
- The council sought to downsize tenants in under-occupied housing where possible. For example, one and two bedroom properties on the Bemerton Estate had recently been earmarked for those looking to downsize. This would increase the availability of family-sized units, however, it was acknowledged that many tenants did not want to downsize from larger properties.

RESOLVED:

That the progress against key performance indicators in Quarter 1 be noted.

226

SCAFFOLDING AND WORK PLATFORMS SCRUTINY REVIEW - 12 MONTH UPDATE (Item B4)

Damian Dempsey, Group Leader – Quantity Surveyors, and Mike Hall, Direct Works Group Leader, presented the report which set out progress in implementing the recommendations of the scaffolding and work platforms review.

The following main points were noted in the discussion:

- A member commented on scaffolding being used to carry out work at a relatively low height. Officers advised that scaffolding was installed to provide a safe working environment, regardless of height.
- Following a question about mobile elevating work platforms, it was confirmed that the council owned one vehicle which was used daily. A scissor platform was sometimes hired to carry out pre-construction surveys.
- Whilst Housing sought to maximise the use of maintenance-free materials, planning permission for installation was not always granted.
- The council emphasised to its staff and contractors that scaffolding should be removed at the earliest opportunity. A member raised casework related to scaffolding being kept on housing association properties for unreasonably long periods of time. Officers could not comment on the practices of other organisations.

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- It was noted that the roofs of some properties could be accessed from inside the building, however this sometimes required access to be granted by tenants or leaseholders, and this was not always received.
- The future of OJEU procurement rules was unknown given the decision to leave the European Union; however it was not expected for procurement rules to be relaxed, as the OJEU rules were strongly supported by the government.
- The council was working to multi-skill all operatives. Training was taking place at Hackney College, with 120 operatives to be trained over the next few years.
- The Committee commented on the financial pressures facing the council and emphasised that any saving on the cost of scaffolding would be welcomed.

RESOLVED:

That progress made in implementing the recommendations of the Scaffolding and Work Platforms Scrutiny Review be noted.

The meeting ended at 9.10 pm

CHAIR