

London Borough of Islington

Housing Scrutiny Committee - 2 February 2017

Minutes of the meeting of the Housing Scrutiny Committee held at Committee Room 4, Town Hall, Upper Street, N1 2UD on 2 February 2017 at 7.30 pm.

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

Observer: Rose-Marie McDonald

Also present: Cllr D Ward

Councillor Michael O'Sullivan in the Chair

246 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Item A1)

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Gary Doolan, Marian Spall and Aysegul Erdogan.

Councillor O'Halloran submitted apologies for lateness.

247 DECLARATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (Item A2)

None.

248 DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS (Item A3)

Rose-Marie McDonald declared a personal interest in Item 3, Housing Services for Vulnerable People: Witness Evidence, as she was a Partners resident.

249 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING (Item A4)

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 10 January 2017 be confirmed as a correct record and the Chair be authorised to sign them.

250 CHAIR'S REPORT (Item A5)

The Chair commented that the evidence received from the Housing Disability Panel at the previous meeting had been extremely useful. It was noted that members of the Committee would meet with members of the Panel to discuss draft recommendations in advance of the next meeting.

It was noted that a representative of Homes for Haringey was due to present their evidence to the Committee however unfortunately they were unable to attend the meeting.

251 ORDER OF BUSINESS (Item A6)

No changes were proposed to the order of business.

252 PUBLIC QUESTIONS (Item A7)

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

253 RSL SCRUTINY (Item B1)

The Chair noted that Family Mosaic Housing Association was not able to attend the meeting, and led a discussion on how the Committee scrutinises housing associations.

It was advised that there were around 15,500 properties managed by housing associations in Islington. The Committee considered that its previous scrutiny of housing associations had been successful; and commented that best practice in terms of services for residents tended to be demonstrated by smaller housing associations.

The National Housing Federation had developed a 'sector scorecard' to evaluate the performance of housing associations. The Chair expressed concern that this was disproportionately focused on commercial measures and considered residents as 'customers'.

The Committee noted the trend of housing associations merging and raised concerns that this could lead to housing associations becoming more remote and losing their connection to local communities. Concern was also expressed about staff terms and conditions in the social housing sector. It was advised that Cllr John Gray of LB Newham Council was campaigning on such issues and it was suggested that the Committee could consider this also.

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

(a) Evidence from Partners for Improvement in Islington

The Committee received a presentation from Tom Irvine, Service Improvement and Engagement Manager at Partners, on the organisation's work in supporting vulnerable people.

The following main points were noted in the discussion:

- Partners managed and maintained 6,400 properties owned by Islington Council. 70% of these properties were tenanted and 30% were leasehold properties. The organisation had more information on its tenants than its leaseholders.
- Partners was aware that 21% of its tenants had a disability or impairment, however thought that the true number would be higher as some residents would have vulnerabilities which were not known to the organisation. Partners only knew the specific details of one third of tenants with an identified disability or impairment, with around a third choosing not to disclose this information to Partners.

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- All Partners' properties were general needs housing and were not specifically designed for those with support or care needs, although many tenants did have such needs.
- Partners acknowledged that it was not a specialist in providing support services and worked to develop relationships with other agencies, including Islington Council Social Services, to make referrals when required. Referrals were made with resident consent in the majority of situations. The organisation maintained a directory of staff to refer to; this helped to ensure that referrals were effective and reached the best possible contact.
- Partners staff received training on vulnerability awareness and identifying vulnerabilities, as well as specific sessions on mental health and safeguarding.
- The Committee noted examples of referrals made by Partners; for example, the repairs team identified that holes in a resident's door were a result of domestic violence and made a referral to the council. Repairs staff had also identified evidence of illegal drug use and had reported this to both the Police and social services.
- Partners prioritised heating and hot water repairs for vulnerable people, aiming to respond to these within 24 hours. The organisation also had a budget for discretionary repairs for vulnerable people, installed adaptations, and provided some internal decorations and gardening works through the council's Assisted Decorations Scheme.
- Partners had a programme of visiting older and vulnerable tenants to assess their needs. This was focused on identifying risks in their home.
- Following a question, it was advised that it was difficult to manage instances of antisocial behaviour when the perpetrator had a mental health condition. It was advised that Partners would seek a pragmatic solution to such scenarios and would need to balance the interests of the perpetrator and those affected by the behaviour. It was advised that in some situations Partners had managed moves for tenants as a result of antisocial behaviour.
- Partners had carried out 45 repairs to date in 2016/17, and more would be carried out by the end of the year.
- Partners' annual budget for assisted decorations was £25,000.
- The Committee noted that many street properties had damp and condensation issues, commenting that this could have a particularly severe effect on vulnerable people. It was queried how Partners dealt with having such a large number of properties with such issues. In response, it was advised that Partners worked with the council to assess the impact of damp and condensation and referred severe cases to a specialist to investigate. A number of Partners' older properties with damp problems were listed buildings and it could be difficult to obtain planning consent to carry out remedial works. Partners did take into account resident vulnerabilities when assessing the impact of damp and did move tenants out of damp properties when necessary. It was advised that the number of complaints about damp and condensation in Partners' properties had decreased over the past two years.
- It was advised that three Partners' properties had been damaged in the Upper Street Flood in December 2016. Two had been damaged significantly. Repairs and temporary accommodation was being funded through Thames Water's insurance. It was advised that one household would likely be in temporary accommodation for the next 12 months.
- A member highlighted that the majority of Partners tenants were aged 40 to 60 and queried what provision there was to support these people to continue live independently as they aged. In response, it was advised if a property became unsuitable for a tenant then a referral would be made to the council's transfer team.

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Partners did not manage allocations, however was aware that many tenants wanted to stay in their own home for as long as possible.

- Although they received many complaints related to noise nuisance, it was advised that Partners did not routinely soundproof properties.
- A member of the public queried how Partners identified vulnerable tenants. In response, it was advised that Partners largely relied on self-identification, however was proactively working to identify vulnerable people through a rolling programme of visits to residents. It was commented that Partners took this responsibility seriously.
- A member of the public queried if Partners' complaints procedure was made public. In response, it was advised that the complaints procedure mirrored the council's; a response to a stage one complaint would be made within 15 days, and stage 2 complaints were referred to the Chief Executive. It was commented that residents could complain to the Housing Ombudsman if their complaint was not resolved to their satisfaction and complaints were scrutinised by the council.
- A member of the public commented on the importance of the relationship between tenants and housing officers, and queried what would happen if this relationship broke down. In response, it was advised that management would consider if a different housing officer could be assigned to work with the individual, however this was not always possible as staff were deployed on a geographic basis. It was emphasised that not all complaints received by Partners were upheld; it was the responsibility of Partners staff to ensure that residents complied with tenancy conditions and this could generate complaints about individuals. However, if it was found that its staff were at fault then action would be taken.
- A member of the public highlighted instances of Partners making repairs which were ineffective or unsuitable for vulnerable residents, including ineffective extractor fans and a smoke alarm which a vulnerable woman was unable to access. Residents with specific issues were invited to contact Partners outside of the meeting.
- It was advised that Partners' tenancy conditions were the same as the council's.
- The Committee queried if Partners ever evicted vulnerable people. In response it was advised that this did happen occasionally, but only as a last resort. It was highlighted that evictions had to be agreed by the courts and there was very strict criteria which had to be met before a request for eviction was granted.

The Committee thanked Mr Irvine for his attendance.

(b) Evidence from Homes for Haringey

The Committee considered the written evidence submitted by Homes for Haringey.

Officers advised that the services provided by Homes for Haringey were similar to those provided by Islington Council, although Homes for Haringey was an arm's length management organisation with a different business model and therefore commissioned certain services from others rather than providing them in-house.

The meeting ended at 9.00 pm

CHAIR