

Housing Scrutiny Committee - 20 June 2017

Minutes of the meeting of the Housing Scrutiny Committee held at Committee Room 4, Town Hall, Upper Street, N1 2UD on 20 June 2017 at 7.30 pm.

Present: **Councillors:** O'Sullivan (Chair), Spall (Vice-Chair), Diner, Erdogan, Gallagher, Gantly, and Hamitouche.

Observer: Rose-Marie McDonald

Also Present: Councillor Diarmaid Ward

Councillor Michael O'Sullivan in the Chair

267 TWO MINUTES' SILENCE

Before the meeting commenced the Committee observed two minutes' silence for all of those affected by the Finsbury Park terror attack and the Grenfell Tower fire.

268 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Item A1)

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Doolan.

269 DECLARATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (Item A2)

None.

270 DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS (Item A3)

None.

271 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING (Item A4)

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the previous meeting held on 28 March 2017 be confirmed as a correct record and the Chair be authorised to sign them.

272 CHAIR'S REPORT (Item A5)

The Chair advised that he had agreed to admit an urgent item onto the agenda to consider the council's response to the Grenfell Tower fire.

273 ORDER OF BUSINESS (Item A6)

The Chair advised that the urgent item on the Grenfell Tower fire would be considered as the first discussion item.

It was advised that Item B2, RSL Scrutiny, would be deferred as Family Mosaic Housing Association was not available to attend the meeting.

274 PUBLIC QUESTIONS (Item A7)

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

275 URGENT ITEM: FIRE SAFETY FOLLOWING THE GRENFELL TOWER FIRE

The Chair had agreed that this item be considered as urgent business as it was essential for the Committee to consider the fire risks to Islington properties and the council's response following the Grenfell Tower fire as soon as possible.

Sean McLaughlin, Corporate Director of Housing and Adult Social Services, and Simon Kwong, Director of Property Services, addressed the Committee on the implications of the Grenfell Tower Fire.

The following main points were noted in the discussion:

- It was not yet known why the fire at the Grenfell Tower spread so rapidly. It was likely that there would have been a number of contributing factors, and as these became known there could be regulatory change which would have implications for the council's housing service.
- Officers advised of the support that Islington Council was providing to the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea and the Grenfell Tower Response Team. Islington had provided four social workers to support those affected by the fire; an Emergency Planning Officer and two Local Authority Liaison Officers had been providing support at the scene and assisting with the emergency response; Housing Needs and Housing Operations staff had been provided to help arrange the temporary housing of those who had lost their homes; the Director of Housing Needs and Strategy had been working as a relief Director of Housing for the Grenfell Tower Response Team; all vacant Islington Council properties were currently being held in case they were needed for temporary accommodation; and Islington was also offering counselling services to the firefighters who attended the scene.
- Grenfell Tower was managed by Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation, which had been criticised for not taking action on the safety concerns of Grenfell Tower residents. It was clarified that Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation was a very different type of organisation to the Tenant Management Organisations (TMOs) which managed some Islington Council properties. Kensington and Chelsea TMO was effectively an arms-length management association for all housing owned by the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. In contrast, the TMOs in Islington were small scale organisations led by the residents who lived in the properties they managed.
- Islington Council brought its housing management function back in-house in 2012; it was commented that the fire safety information received from Homes for Islington at this time was exemplary. At this time the council established a Homes and Estates Safety Board which was independently chaired and included representation from a

number of agencies, including the London Fire Brigade. The Board met regularly to consider safety issues.

- The council also held regular liaison meetings with the London Fire Brigade. This considered general safety issues, as well as specific casework related to those most at risk from fire. It was explained that those who were frail or have physical impairments, those who have mental health issues, hoarders, heavy smokers, and people with substance abuse issues tended to be at a higher risk from fire. Joint working between Housing, Social Services and the Fire Brigade was needed to effectively manage these risks.
- Fire safety improvements were delivered through the council's capital works programme; this generally took the form of installing fire safety doors and lighting. The council also carried out routine fire safety checks. This work was overseen by the Homes and Estates Safety Board.
- Islington Council had recent experience of responding to fires. A number of residents were relocated following the Rollit House fire in 2015, in which nobody was seriously injured. However, it was commented that a fire on the scale of Grenfell Tower would present significant challenges for any local authority.
- It was acknowledged that work was needed to ensure that all residents were informed of fire risks and what action to take in the event of a fire. It was noted that a small fire at the Harvist Estate the previous weekend prompted panic; however the compartmentation of the building ensured that the fire did not spread. Letters containing safety information would be sent to all residents shortly.
- Housing Services reviewed fire risk assessments every three years, or every year for high rise properties. Different types of properties had different risks and, in the event of a fire, this required a different response from residents.
- The council's planning officers were reviewing the past 15 years of planning applications for high-rise buildings and contacting developers if it was thought that their properties may contain combustible cladding.
- The Greater London Authority was leading on engagement with Housing Associations on fire safety issues.
- Officers commented that although the immediate response to the Grenfell Tower was focused on the use of aluminium composite material cladding, it was expected that in the longer term there would be national changes to fire safety regulations, design standards, and how re-development works were carried out.
- Work was underway to assess the fire risks of all council tower blocks. Samples of cladding were being obtained and submitted to the government for testing. The government was also requesting various information on the 126 council housing blocks which were six storeys high or more. Signage, bin locations and outstanding actions on fire risk assessments were also being reviewed.
- It was suggested that the council may have to adopt a stricter policy on matters which affect fire safety, including the use of barbeques in close proximity to buildings and leaving personal items in corridors.
- Officers commented on the importance of providing clear and consistent fire safety advice to residents. Work was underway to provide tailored advice to all of those living in Islington Council properties. In high rise blocks the advice from the London Fire Brigade was that residents should stay put, as compartmentation should mean that fires do not spread between units. However, street properties generally did not have compartmentation and the advice therefore was to evacuate in the event of a fire. It was acknowledged that the advice to stay put was controversial, as it was thought that this contributed to the number of people who lost their lives in the Grenfell Tower fire, however the London Fire Brigade maintained that this was the safest option for those in high rise properties.
- Housing Services had agreed to install linked fire alarms in mansion properties which did not have compartmentation, so that a fire alarm in one unit would trigger

alarms throughout the building, signalling that residents should evacuate. It was commented that similarly installing linked fire alarms in tower blocks would be confusing when the advice is to stay put.

- Officers suggested that the Committee could select Fire Safety as one of its scrutiny topics for the year. It was important to question if the council's fire safety arrangements were robust.
- Following a question, it was confirmed that letters would be sent to residents containing fire safety advice. This advice would be as specific as possible, depending on the construction of the building, the type of cladding used, and other factors. It was known that residents on different estates had different concerns and this would be taken into account.
- The Committee highlighted the public scepticism on the advice to stay put in the event of a fire, and thought that residents may opt to disregard this advice in an emergency situation.
- It was advised that the Executive Member for Housing and Development and the Leader of the Council were holding a number of estate meetings to listen to residents' concerns about fire safety. Local ward councillors were also welcome to attend.
- A member of the Committee commented that the amount of lumber on some estates was presenting a fire risk, and in particular commented that materials left by contractors was not acceptable. It was thought that greater collaboration between housing officers, contractors, caretakers, TMOs and residents' associations was needed to ensure a high level of safety.
- It was advised that the council was due to install cladding on Gambier House, however this has been put on hold.
- A member of the Committee commented that illegal subletting at the Grenfell Tower meant that the names of all of those who lost their lives in the fire may never be known. It was queried if Islington Council would adopt a stricter approach to subletting as a result. In response, officers advised that Islington's approach to subletting was already aggressive. Each year the council checked 10% of its properties to ensure that they were not being sub-let. The council also responded to any information received that properties were being sub-let. This resulted in the council taking possession of around 100 council properties a year.
- It was commented that the council was lobbying for short term lettings companies such as Air B&B not to advertise to let out council owned properties.
- A member of the Committee queried the date by which the council was expected to provide all information to the government by. In response, it was advised that different timescales applied to different information, however information was being provided as quickly as possible. It was expected that further information would be requested in the coming days.
- A member of the Committee queried if fire extinguishers should be provided in communal areas of council properties. In response it was explained that the London Fire Brigade advised against this, as people put themselves in danger by attempting to tackle fires themselves, and different fires required different extinguishers. Using the wrong type of extinguisher on a fire could make the fire worse.
- A member of the Committee commented that the response of Kensington and Chelsea Council appeared to be slow and unsatisfactory, and asked if members could be reassured that Islington Council's response would be better in a similar scenario. Officers expressed some sympathy with Kensington and Chelsea Council, commenting that the scale of the fire and level of disruption caused was too large for any local authority to deal with effectively, however also noted that if such a fire was to happen again then the cross-borough emergency response would be instigated much faster. It was thought that Islington's emergency planning arrangements were

very strong, however the response to incidents of this scale needed to be regional, with contributions from other local authorities and agencies.

- It was advised that the council did not hold practice evacuations for residents, as this would be a significant task and would likely cause distress and inconvenience, particularly to vulnerable and disabled people. However, officers commented that the Committee could consider this further.
- It was confirmed that all of the council's high rise properties had hardwired smoke alarms which did not require batteries.
- Members expressed concern with the subcontracting of works and commented that this could result in cost-cutting and works not being carried out to the agreed specification. It was queried if the council would review its supply chain and consider carrying out more works in-house. Officers appreciated these concerns, however advised that some works needed specialist staff and the council may not have the skills and experience to complete all works in-house.
- In response to a question, it was advised that most domestic fires across London were caused by faulty white goods, candles and tea lights, and smoking. The use of alcohol was often a contributing factor.
- The Committee highlighted that the residents of Grenfell Tower had been raising concerns about fire safety for many years. It was advised that Islington Council was now receiving such concerns on a daily basis, and these were being reviewed.
- Dr Brian Potter, Chairman of Islington Leaseholders Association, commented that he had been querying if leaseholders were legally responsible for fitting fire doors for several years however had not received a satisfactory response, as the correspondence received on this matter was not clear enough. Officers confirmed that fitting fire doors was the responsibility of leaseholders, and indicated that the advice on this would be reviewed.
- Members of the public raised concerns in relation to the street properties managed by Partners for Improvement in Islington. It was commented that Partners previously had a robust resident scrutiny forum, however this was now defunct. There was a concern that residents did not have an effective route to hold Partners to account and raise safety concerns. In response, the Executive Member for Housing and Development acknowledged the importance of resident scrutiny and advised that he would raise this with the Chief Executive of Partners.
- Councillor Russell asked if fire risk assessments for council housing blocks would be published online. In response, officers advised that fire risk assessments were available on request, however these were technical documents containing a large amount of information and were not always easily accessible to a layperson. Officers were considering publishing the documents, however explained that they may not be particularly helpful to residents. Councillor Russell commented that publishing the documents would be in the spirit of accountability and transparency, and suggested that the documents could be supplemented by clear and practical fire safety information.
- Following a question from Councillor Russell, it was confirmed that no changes had been made to follow up actions on fire risk assessments as a result of budget cuts.
- Councillor Russell highlighted the fire safety concerns of those living in the private rented sector, which included scepticism about the safety of buildings, particularly if their compliance with building control regulations was signed off by a private building control inspector as opposed to the local authority. In response, officers advised that property owners had the right to choose how they sought building control approval, however residents or property owners with any specific concerns were welcome to contact the council's building control section.
- A member of the public suggested that greater engagement was needed with residents of the Harvist Estate following the fire the previous weekend. It was

reported that local residents were worried and a lack of official guidance was leading to misinformation spreading. In response it was advised that the council was working closely with the London Fire Brigade to provide residents with clear advice. The Executive Member had been on the estate to meet with residents, and a door knocking exercise would be carried out shortly, which would provide residents with advice and would enable any queries or concerns to be raised.

- The Chair of the Brooke Park Tenant Management Co-operative highlighted the recent article in the Islington Tribune which suggested that Islington Council intended to bring tenant management organisations in-house due to safety concerns, commenting that such a move to control these organisations would be disrespectful to the TMOs, which were democratic organisations that provide good services. In response, it was emphasised that there were no plans to bring TMO management in-house; the council considered that Islington's TMOs were well run and their contribution to the borough's housing mix was valued.
- A member of the public highlighted examples of where refurbishment works had created fire safety flaws in Islington properties; for example, the fitting of pipes in one property had created a hole in a ceiling which resulted in the property above filling with smoke during a fire. It was suggested that fire safety needed to be taken into account every time a change was made to the fabric of a building. It was commented that such issues had been raised with Area Housing Offices however they had not been resolved.
- A member of the public queried how seriously the council took government regulation when it appeared that the Display Energy Certificates in public buildings were out of date.
- Officers advised that the concerns of residents would be taken into account, and suggested that a public meeting was required for further issues to be raised and discussed.

The Committee thanked the officers for their attendance.

276 QUARTERLY REVIEW OF HOUSING PERFORMANCE (Q4 2016/17) (Item B3)

Councillor Diarmaid Ward, Executive Member for Housing and Development, presented the quarterly performance update.

The following main points were noted in the discussion:

- It was welcomed that the number of new affordable homes being built had increased in comparison to the same period the previous year.
- Members raised concern that Partners' rent arrears and repairs figures were above target. The Executive Member shared these concerns and had met with the Chief Executive of Partners to discuss these concerns, as well as other issues. It was advised that the Executive Member would continue to meet the Chief Executive every six weeks.
- It was speculated that the lack of under-occupied households that were downsizing was due to fears about changes to tenancy conditions introduced through the Housing and Planning Act. It was also suggested that those moving from older council tenancies to new housing association tenancies may move to a much smaller property without making a significant saving on their rent.
- It was suggested that downsizing may be encouraged further by allowing households to downsize from, for example, a three-bedroom house to a two-bedroom flat, rather than a significantly smaller one-bedroom flat.

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- It was confirmed that those downsizing were bidding for the same properties as other housing applicants.
- A member raised that downsizing advice sessions were only held on a Wednesday from 12noon until 2pm. It was commented that this was not convenient for those who worked and it was suggested that changing the days and times of these sessions could make them more accessible and encourage more people to downsize.
- It was suggested that some performance targets should be reviewed to make them more ambitious.

RESOLVED:

That the progress against key performance indicators to the end of Quarter 4 2016/17 be noted.

277 MEMBERSHIP, TERMS OF REFERENCE AND DATES OF MEETINGS (Item B1)

RESOLVED:

That the membership, terms of reference and dates of meetings of the Housing Scrutiny Committee for the municipal year 2017/18 be noted.

278 RSL SCRUTINY (Item B2)

Deferred.

279 HOUSING SERVICES FOR VULNERABLE PEOPLE: FINAL REPORT (Item B4)

RESOLVED:

That the report be agreed and submitted to the Executive.

280 SCRUTINY TOPICS AND WORK PROGRAMME 2017/18 (Item B5)

The Committee indicated that it wished to carry out two main reviews of fire safety and the housing services' communications, and two smaller reviews of the council's new build programme and how the council works with housing associations.

RESOLVED:

That the work plan be agreed, subject to the inclusion of reviews of fire safety, the housing services' communications, the new build programme, and how the council works with housing associations.

The meeting ended at 9.55 pm

CHAIR