

London Borough of Islington

Housing Scrutiny Committee - 14 January 2019

Minutes of the meeting of the Housing Scrutiny Committee held at Committee Room 4, Town Hall, Upper Street, N1 2UD - Islington Town Hall on 14 January 2019 at 7.30 pm.

Present: **Councillors:** O'Sullivan (Chair), Lukes (Vice-Chair), Gallagher, Hamitouche, Heather, Mackmurdie, O'Halloran, Russell, McDonald and Dean

Councillor Michael O'Sullivan in the Chair

51 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Item 1)

Apologies were received from Councillor Debono.

52 DECLARATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (Item 2)

There were no declarations of substitute members.

53 DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS (Item 3)

There were no declarations of interest.

54 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING (Item 4)

RESOLVED:

1. That Clarion's suggestion that their offer of fixed terms rather than life tenancies was due to government policy was inaccurate as this was housing guidance to housing providers which could be ignored.
2. That the minutes of the meeting held on 19 November 2018 be confirmed as an accurate record of proceedings and the Chair be authorised to sign them.

55 CHAIR'S REPORT (Item 5)

The Chair informed the meeting that he attended Haringey Housing Scrutiny Committee to give evidence on issues around the Committee's recent review into cladding concerns and Fire Safety on Friday 14 December 2018.

The meeting was advised that Partners Improvement had been invited to the next meeting and all efforts would be made via a press release to publicise the meeting so that it will attract the public and in particular the residents.

The Chair on behalf of the Committee expressed their thanks to the current Principal New Homes Development Project Manager, Rosemarie Jenkins who was leaving Islington Council especially with her input to scrutiny reviews.

The Chair also informed the Committee that with regards the current review of responsive repairs, he along with the Council will be considering evidence gathered with a view to

drafting a number of recommendations. Members were invited to feed into the process by emailing the Chair or the clerk their contributions.

56 ORDER OF BUSINESS (Item 6)

The order of business would be as per the agenda.

57 PUBLIC QUESTIONS (Item 7)

58 SCRUTINY REVIEW : SID AND INTRODUCTORY PRESENTATION (HOMELESSNESS) (Item B1)

The Committee received a presentation from Ramesh Logeswaran, the Interim Head of Housing Needs regarding Homelessness and Rough Sleeping in Islington. A copy of the presentation is interleaved with the agenda.

The following points were noted in the discussion:

- Islington Council's overriding approach to the issue of homelessness is to help people build resilience through prevention and early intervention. As the reasons for homelessness varies, the council endeavours to provide practical assistance such as being able to access rent deposit schemes and signposting residents to organisations such as Home finder UK, Sanctuary scheme and Islington Lettings where alternative and affordable accommodation can be offered.
- Housing officers intervene on behalf of tenants with landlords in the private sector so as to alleviate homelessness by guaranteeing rental income especially if they are willing to offer discounted market rents.
- Members were informed that for those already homeless, the service makes decisions in line with the Housing Act and support remains in place until a decision is made.
- Collaborative and strong partnership across the public sector and ideas shared at the Islington Homelessness Forum and Lead officers at strategic housing needs across the North London sub region has resulted in a different approach to addressing homelessness.
- In comparison with neighbouring authorities, Islington has had a significant reduction in the number of homelessness decisions due to its approach and has therefore exceeded the Council's Corporate target of 400 over the last three years. Meeting was informed that between 2016 and 2017, 1173 households were prevented from becoming homeless.
- Islington has one of the lowest numbers of households in temporary accommodation in London and 60% of temporary accommodation is within the borough. Islington will continue to purchase properties to use as temporary accommodation, minimising the use of private sector accommodation and also ensuring that those who are homeless are still able to retain their social, educational and family networks.
- Collaborative and strong partnership across the public sector and ideas shared at the Islington Homelessness Forum and Lead officers at strategic housing needs across the North London sub region has resulted in a different approach to addressing homelessness.
- The Lead Officer acknowledged that the increase in homelessness was due to insufficient supply of affordable housing and the removal of assured short-hold tenancies in the private sector such as housing associations. In addition, the introduction of housing benefit restrictions in 2010 and the governments welfare reform has worsened the situation.
- 2,504 households approached Islington Council's Housing Aid Team and sought advice in 2017/18 a fall from 2014/15. The meeting was informed that a common

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reason for homelessness is parents, family or friends not willing to accommodate and having children within the family or expecting a child.

- In terms of breakdown, the meeting was advised that two thirds of accepted cases are between 20 and 40 years old and about two thirds of accepted cases tend to be female with a small majority of accepted cases being lone parents.
- Members were advised that the Homeless Reduction Act has introduced a number of changes ,the duty to provide advisory service has been strengthened; the period during which an applicant can be considered as threatened with homelessness has increased from 28 days to 56 days; a new duty to assess all eligible applicants and for Council's to take reasonable steps to prevent and relieve homelessness.
- The Lead Officer informed the meeting that one of the requirement to alleviate homelessness is to produce a personalised housing plan which is collectively agreed between the local authority and the applicant.
- Members were advised that although it was too early to assess the impact of the new legislation on the Housing Revenue Account, anecdotal evidence shows that there has been a reluctance by applicants to engage in Personalised Housing Plans; an increase in bureaucracy as a result of the new duties thereby diverting resources from carrying out specific their duties of searching for alternative accommodation and negotiating with landlords.
- The Lead Officer acknowledged the increasing numbers of people rough sleeping in Islington and highlighted Council's robust plans to address it. Members were informed that the Council had in place a coordinated response from multiple departments within the Council and externally with other London wide initiatives. In addition the Council has commissioned additional units for emergency shelters; recruited staff to support rough sleepers; joint working with neighbouring boroughs and services to tackle hot-spot areas and is seeking additional funding from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.
- As a result of the Council's initiatives, 5 long term rough sleepers have now been placed in Social Housing as part of the Council's Housing First pilot, 3 mental assessments had been undertaken via EASL which allows Officers have a better understanding of the support needs of the applicant and the type of housing required. In addition, the meeting was informed that outreach workers had been able to secure accommodation for 6 rough sleepers with complex needs within 4 weeks and provided dedicated support to maintain accommodation.
- The meeting was informed that following governments requirement that all local authorities have a strategy to address homelessness, a five year (2019-2023) Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy, endorsed by the Health and Well-Being Board is being drafted. A comprehensive action plan to be delivered by the Housing Needs service and a number of partners has been developed.
- Members were advised that the delivery of the action plan will be sponsored by the Health and Well-Being Board annually after it's has been agreed by the Council's Executive Members in 2019. The Lead Officer advised that the various vulnerable groups will continue to be included as part of the strategy. The meeting was informed that in addition to other groups, former members of the regular armed forces and people from outside of the UK without settled status and no recourse to public funds will be given particular attention.
- The Council proactively engages with stakeholders such as Homes and Communities, Children's and Adults Social Care, Community Safety and external partners such as Partners for Islington, Housing Associations and St Mungos Outreach through which it is quickly able to intervene early in households before the situation worsens.
- The Lead Officer acknowledged that due to the dearth in supply of social housing and applicant's reliance on private sector accommodation especially housing

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associations, the Council is aiming in the long run to build more social housing to address homelessness in the borough.

- In response to concerns that homeless people had been observed settling down on pavements and designated cycle routes with beddings and its implications regarding pedestrian safety, the Lead Officer acknowledged that in addition to introducing punitive measures, officers are looking at options with counterparts in the community safety team to address this issue.
- In response to a suggestion that the Council's criteria for eligibility be extended to include elderly and disabled persons which has been noticeably been on the rise, the lead officer advised that the Council treats all applicants irrespective of age with dignity, however cases identified will be looked into.
- In response to a request for more details on the reasons for officer refusal's and outcomes from judicial reviews, the lead officer informed Members that a report which details the breakdown will be circulated, however noting that in general the Council has a good successful rate in appeal cases.
- On the issue of medical assessments of applicants, the Service Director, Housing Needs & Strategy informed Members that the Service would be prepared to look at other options and will be in discussion with the local Clinical Commissioning Group on whether they would be prepared to carry out the medical assessments.
- In response to concerns that the public still continue to give homeless people money, food and clothes, the Service Director, Housing Needs & Strategy acknowledged that years ago the Council distributed leaflets in well-known hot spot areas advising against giving monies provided which was well received by the public.
- Members welcomed a suggestion that in the process of assessing applicants, officers should consider applicant's life journey as most do not intentionally become homeless. Members agreed that a further analysis would ensure that housing officers take a right decision on whether for example moving the tenant into a more affordable accommodation would prevent homelessness.

The Chair thanked Officers for their presentation and their responses to issues raised.

59 **SCRUTINY REVIEW: WITNESS EVIDENCE (HACKNEY COUNCIL) (Item B2)**

The Chair invited Mr Rick Snow, a leaseholder to give evidence to the Committee on his experience with the Council's responsive service

- Mr Snow had reported in February 2018 a water leak coming through his hall way ceiling which was coming from a flat occupied by a council tenant.
- Mr Snow informed the meeting of his daily interactions with numerous council officers over a long period and his frustration in getting the Council to acknowledge that the damage was from the flat above.
- An independent surveyor was employed to identify the cause of the leak and despite evidence provided to Council, Mr Snow was referred to different personnel and sections and at a point was informed that works could not be done as a result of possible asbestos and miscommunication with the tenant in the above flat. This was very time consuming for Mr Snow and he is concerned that despite the delays his service charges had increased.
- The meeting was informed that repair was completed after a 10 month delay in December 2018.

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- In response to Mr Snow's complaints, the Group Leader Repairs expressed his apologies and acknowledged that this was a case where there was failure from the onset and throughout. With regard to the staff involved, the Group Leader indicated that this was being looked at with the view that there may be a training requirement for staff involved to ensure that this does not occur again.
- With regards to leaks, the Officer agreed that in this instance this was mistakenly diagnosed however in some properties most delays are caused by access issues. Meeting was advised that Council will be more active in gaining access to resolve leaks and that in the future when leaseholder's report a repair, officers would be looking to improve the interaction with the call centre advisers.
- Members were disappointed with the level of service received by Mr Snow and requested a breakdown of the Council's cost and the cost involved in restoring the property and the cost that the leasehold incurred especially having undertaken a survey to identify the leak.

The Chair thanked Mr Snow for his evidence to the Committee and invited Steve Platt, Head of Building Maintenance and Estate Environment, Hackney Council to give his presentation and the following main points were raised and discussed -

- Members were informed that the decision to bring Hackney Homes back in house happened in April 2016 and the department was renamed Housing Services
- Housing Service directly manages 31,000 properties of which 9,000 are leaseholders and that in 2017/18, Housing Services carried out 85,000 responsive repairs which included cyclical works.
- Hackney Council operates an in-house Repairs Call Centre along with an on line offer. The intention is to expand the on line offer to communal repairs.
- The Responsive repairs are delivered by Building Maintenance along with a number of cyclical work streams. The Building Maintenance group is split between the Repairs Team (Client) and the Direct Labour Organisation (DLO). The repairs 'client' side is undergoing a restructure and the new structure will include the surveying and disrepair teams, customer service including complex casework and the call centre aligned with the DLO planners.
- In response to a question regarding the status of DLO staff, the meeting was advised that DLO staff are primarily Hackney's internal workforce; 220 employees of which 173 operatives are involved in carpentry, electrical, plumbing, multi trade, plastering, roofing and glazing.
- During the 2017/18 Municipal year, the DLO undertook £17m of repairs and surplus income generated was invested back into the Housing Revenue Account. The Council has an established apprentice scheme and promotes new initiatives such as the Improvers Scheme specifically for people within the 20-30 age group who have qualifications such as City and Guild and keen on being tradespeople
- Members were informed that although the Repairs Team is currently supplemented by temporary staff, 40 are full time employees. Within its restructuring plans Hackney aims to reduce the use of agency staff and increase the number of fulltime employees with specialist skills. In response to a question regarding the Council's ongoing restructuring, the Head of Building Maintenance advised of a number of changes in the areas of commercial and contract management, area surveying and customer service team.

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- With regard to future developments, the meeting was informed of plans to offer gas safety checks to leaseholders and possibility of offering a similar repair services that the team presently carries out for council tenants at competitive rates.
- Members were advised that new accommodation was being sought as its present site was regarded as not fit for purpose. Meeting was also informed that senior management from neighbouring authorities regularly meet to share ideas and experiences.
- On the decision to create four surveying areas and if there was any noticeable impact, the meeting was advised by Head of Building Maintenance and Estate Environment that the restructuring of the surveying team had not been implemented as recruitment of surveyors was ongoing, however he offered to share the outcome with the Committee in the following year.
- On the issue of access into properties, the meeting was advised that due to the lease arrangement between the Council and residents, and for health and safety concerns, it has not been an issue to access properties to carry out essential works or repairs. In addition, Hackney Council has an out of hours service to carry out essential and urgent work if required.
- Meeting was informed that complex water leaks in properties are handled by a team called Leaks Hub which may be reported in a number of ways but then coordinated separately so they are not held up in the system.
- In response to a question about the Improvers Scheme, the Manager agreed to share details of the scheme with his counterpart in Islington and the Committee.

RESOLVED:

1. That Officers provide a breakdown of the repair cost to Council in restoring the leaseholder flat
2. That the presentation be noted.

60 WORK PROGRAMME (Item B3)

RESOLVED:

That the work programme be noted

The meeting ended at 10.10pm

CHAIR