

Housing Scrutiny Committee - 25 November 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 25 November 2019 at 7.30 pm.

Present: **Councillors:** O'Sullivan (Chair), Debono, Hamitouche, Heather, McDonald (Co-Optee) and Donaghey (Co-Optee)

Councillor Michael O'Sullivan in the Chair

132 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Item 1)

Apologies were received from Councillors Lukes, Gallagher, Mackmurdie and Spall.

133 DECLARATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (Item 2)

There were no declarations of substitute members.

134 DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS (Item 3)

There were no declarations of interest.

135 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING (Item 4)

Matters Arising:

A Member enquired if officers had received information from the Camden's Commercial Manager regarding responsive repairs and the criteria assessment used to determine which works to be brought back in house had been received. The clerk to look into this issue.

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 31 October 2019 be confirmed as an accurate record of proceedings and the Chair be authorised to sign them.

136 CHAIR'S REPORT (Item 5)

The Chair welcomed members of the Housing Disability Panel to the meeting and in particular their contribution at future meetings.

The Chair reminded members of a number of forthcoming housing related events, details to be circulated to interested members, one of which is the Housing Construction event in Uxbridge on Friday where the Hackitt Review report will be discussed.

The Chair informed the meeting that the breakdown of the communal heating systems in Brooke House, Redbrick House and Spa Green had been brought to his attention, however he welcomed the news from Council Officers that this had now been resolved. The Chair mentioned that the item will be on the agenda for consideration at a future meeting in 2020 when all contractual matters have been fully resolved.

137 ORDER OF BUSINESS (Item 6)

The order of business would be as per the agenda.

138 PUBLIC QUESTIONS (Item 7)

None

139 RSL SCRUTINY : ISLINGTON SHOREDITCH HOUSING ASSOCIATION (Item B1)

The Committee received a presentation from Ruth Davison, Chief Executive, Islington and Shoreditch Housing Association about its work, challenges and future plans as a landlord in the borough.

The following points were highlighted:

- Islington and Shoreditch Housing Association (ISHA) is committed to building homes of high quality where everyone irrespective of their background has the opportunity to reach their potential and enjoy a good quality of life. The meeting was informed that ISHA has developed many homes in the borough in partnership with developers and with Islington Council who, for example, recently provided a plot of land at the old Ashmount school site at a price which enabled ISHA to build 60 homes - 100 percent of which were social rent or shared ownership.
- Meeting was informed that ISHA has been in operation within the borough since 1933 and has presently 616 homes built for social housing, with presence in other neighbouring authorities such as Camden, Hackney and Haringey and outer boroughs such as Waltham Forest. Meeting was informed that half of ISHA homes have been built in the last 20 years and it continues to look for opportunities to grow and to build more houses. ISHA's Board is run by volunteers and staff and contractors are paid the London Living wage.
- Chief Executive informed members that in its pursuit to build and help others to build homes ISHA established the North River Alliance(NRA) 15 years ago, a development consortium of 11 small housing associations where both expertise and resources are shared and has over the years delivered 3,500 homes.
- Meeting was advised that ISHA continues to strive to be a good landlord, does not have starter tenancies; is committed to life tenancies; new homes and all re-lets are provided at social rents and importantly it does not carry

out affordability checks for social rented homes. In addition, homes are built with great space and high environmental standards.

- With regards to repairs and maintenance, ISHA endeavours to provide high quality service, however feedback from a recent STAR survey shows an overall satisfaction rate of just 60% which indicates that there is still room for improvement especially with its first time fixes. The Chief Executive assured members that ISHA is addressing this and that its analysis has recognised that although in general the service is good, there are issues of consistency and communication that need to be addressed.
- Ruth Davison informed the meeting that in its pursuit of being a good landlord to its residents, training is provided to all staff on a range of issues, both staff and contractors are now being held accountable and in extreme cases contracts were terminated due to service failure. ISHA continues to invest in stock and repairs and have been able to set new standards, which was co-created with residents at 'action days'.
- On the consultations held at St Mary's Path estate, Ruth Davison reminded members that on taking office, she made commitments that secure and assured tenants had the right to remain; that there would be no loss of social homes and no increase in rents for its residents.
- Ruth Davison informed the meeting that following the consultation ISHA has abided by the majority view and would not be demolishing any of the buildings on the estate, nor carrying out the refurbishment as consulted upon. It will now form a task and finish group to reach agreement on the scope of works.
- ISHA prides itself as being anchored in the community it serves, it remains the first housing authority to become a London Living Wage employer which is also applied to contractors that carry out work on behalf of the organisation. ISHA takes the issue of climate emergency seriously and its efforts have been recognised by winning the SHIFT Gold award for its activities. ISHA also provides tenancy sustainment & outreach & support services for its own residents and to Vietnamese residents more widely as it has a specialist outreach team.
- With regards to the future, the Chief Executive requested further assistance especially with the high value of land within the borough. In addition, the Chief Executive requested if the Council could consider changing the mortgage clause in the S106 agreements and adopt that which is agreed between the GLA and NHF as it will enable organisations borrow and build more affordable homes within the borough.
- Meeting was advised that ISHA has an Asset Strategy through which it carries out both its cyclical and responsive repairs to its properties investing over £2000 per household. ISHA does not utilise direct labour services in carrying out its repairs, but employs Mears as its contractor. In terms of gas safety checks, compliance and certificates, the services of an external

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organisation is also employed. Meeting was advised that fire safety certificates of all its building blocks are published on the ISHA organisations website.

- On the issue of contracts, the meeting was informed that ISHA is in the position of looking at disaggregating its contracts so that it employs local contractors instead of being subjected to the OJEU rules in tendering or contracts.
- Members were advised that ISHA does not offer starter tenancy and that 75% of its nomination comes via the local authority with the remaining 25% reserved for management transfers to residents who are experiencing domestic abuse, harassment or have a medical condition.
- In response to overcrowding concerns in households, Ruth Davison informed the meeting that due to lack of capacity ISHA is unable to address this but continues to work in conjunction with Islington's Housing Needs Manager by signposting its residents to available support. Members were informed that a piece of work being carried out in conjunction with other housing associations to find suitable accommodation for tenants interested in downsizing will help alleviate the overcrowding issues in the borough.
- On monitoring of repairs and the quality of the work carried out, Ruth Davison acknowledged that the current practice of residents receiving text survey from contractors when works are completed is recognised as inadequate as evidence confirms that residents prefer either a physical visit or completing written questionnaires, hence the decision by ISHA to employ an officer to undertake the monitoring of repairs. The Chief Executive reiterated that the organisation has recognised the need to redefine what is termed first time fixes which is now easily understood by both the repair operatives and the residents.
- In response to a question about rents, meeting was advised that tenants pay affordable social rents and not sub-market rents which is sometimes described as affordable rents.
- On the question of whether the partnership arrangement with the Council has been beneficial to both parties, Cllr Ward, Executive Member for Housing acknowledged the arrangement especially in light of the scarcity of land and the authority is willing to work with similar small size community association to build high quality social housing homes for its residents.
- In response to a request for more information about the North River Alliance consortium and its efforts in building homes, the Chief Executive agreed to provide more details via the clerk of the committee. The Chair encouraged ISHA to liaise with officers about its community energy initiatives as it will be beneficial to its residents in terms of addressing fuel poverty and high energy

bills.

- In terms of community engagement and consultation, the meeting was advised that efforts are made to ensure participation of its residents and provides transport for vulnerable residents to such meetings.
- In response to a question from the Housing Disability Panel regarding smoke alarms, lack of consultation and its impact on deaf residents, the Director Housing and communities advised that specialist Council officers with specialism working with deaf will be able to share the products available for households with deaf people. On the concerns that blind residents could get stuck in lifts, The Director Housing and Communities indicated that although no solutions exists at present she indicated that she will be willing to meet HLP representatives to discuss the issues early in 2020.

The Chair on behalf of the Committee thanked the Chief Executive, Islington and Shoreditch Housing Association for her presentation, extending an invitation to ISHA to update committee on its future plans.

140 **EFFECTIVENESS OF COMMUNICATIONS -12 MONTH REPORT BACK (Item B2)**

Paul Byer, Service Improvement and Involvement Manager updated Members on the progress of the recommendations in a report produced in May 2016 following the review undertaken by the Housing Scrutiny Committee on the effectiveness of Housing Services Communications.

In the discussion the following points were made -

- On Recommendation 1, to agree a code of communications for the Council's Housing Services, TMO's and Partners for improvement and contractors, Paul Byer advised that although Partners is responsible for improving its own communications within its organisation, the Council has granted Partners access to the Council's on-line Housing Library on the intranet which has Council guidance on documents such as Write First Time Toolkit, Writing Style Guidance, updated branding guidelines etc. In addition, TMO's have been sent the council's communications guidance and good practice information.
- With regards to Recommendation 2 & 7 which relates to improving complaints processes, the meeting was informed that a complaints improvement Action plan has been put in place to improve complaints handling in Property Services. In addition, the Repairs Customer Service Team have also been provided training on handling and dealing with difficult phone calls and the quality checking system for complaints responses from the team has also been reviewed.
- With regard to managing resident's complex responsive repairs, a named manager will be in place to deal with these type of complaints. Meeting was

also informed that a Property Services Complaints Resident Group has been set up. This is a forum for resident input into improving handling and improving how we learn from complaints. Changes have recently been made to the learning from complaints process within Property Services. Repair Group Leaders now have more timely information about complaints linked to their service area to improve performance.

- On Recommendation 4 and 6, making better use of communications, members were advised that protocol is in place with regards to the use of Electronic Notice Boards (ENB's) especially as they are now used to support corporate, community information and localised messages. Residents views have been taken on board so ENB's now display local information specific to their estate, job opportunities and training and community services for different groups.
- In response to Recommendation 5 and 10 which addresses out of date information and broken links on the Council website, the manager informed members that the Service has been able to put in place a well-established process for residents and staff to report issues about the information on the website or being able to query information that needs clarification with the communication team being able to monitor it regularly, investigate and address any anomalies. In addition, the meeting was informed that since 2019, the communications team is now responsible for managing the content on the website and will be working more closely with services to review and improve their pages.
- Members were reminded of the future legal requirement for content on the council website to be accessible to a wider range of people and those with disabilities such as blindness and low vision, deafness and hearing loss, limited movement, speech disabilities, photosensitivity and residents with learning disabilities and cognitive limitations.
- With regard to recommendation 15 which addresses the ability of caretakers and front line staff to report and follow up issues on behalf of residents, the meeting was advised that all caretakers have undertaken bespoke "Eyes and Ears" training which is designed to enable and empower staff to be vigilant, ask questions, build relationships and report issues to relevant teams where they have concerns. In addition, members were advised that the service has also developed a pilot " quick referral" process for caretakers and Estate Services if it recognises any immediate concern of residents welfare or where they feel someone may need a helping hand.
- Recommendation 16 addresses the online reporting system which was recently down. The new system has been re-launched, which allows residents to re-schedule and cancel appointments on-line.
- With regards to recommendation 19, making better use of bulk mailing to communicate information effectively to residents about council initiatives on

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issues with the universal credit and SHINE, the meeting was informed that in the last two years, Homes and Communities have been making better use of the reverse of annual rent statements to include information and advice on property maintenance, tenancy management or promotion of early intervention services.

- In response to vulnerable resident's concerns that call centre staff not being aware of their details therefore causing delays to their repairs being carried out, Members were advised that a list for all its vulnerable residents exists which is updated weekly and available to Housing Incident Managers which can be shared if an out of hours crisis arises.
- Full implementation of the Power BI system is not in place yet. Property Services are working with Islington Digital Services to implement a new suite of IT reporting and monitoring dashboards. The Chair informed members that this IT issue will be considered at a future meeting.
- Meeting was informed that Islington Caretakers do a remarkable good job in maintaining the general outlook of their estates and in addition do replace light bulbs in communal areas. Caretakers tend to be the 'eyes and ears' and kept to date about issues around safeguarding, child and domestic abuse and missing children.
- In response to a question on if any caretaker duties had been outsourced, the meeting was advised that this would only occur in rare instances for example resolving complex electrical lighting issues.

Jo Murphy, Director Homes and Communities updated members of changes in the Service area within the last year. The following points were highlighted -

- Meeting was informed of the new leadership in place and the rebranding of the Service to Homes and Communities Service. Prior to the restructure, operations were based on a geographical north/south divide with the level of service provided to residents' dependent on the quality, calibre and availability of housing officers based in the area office.
- The Director advised members that prior to the restructure it was noticeable that operations was more process driven rather than resident engagement, however with the changes, officers are now in contact with residents, visit residents and carry out the necessary assessments. The Service has had to reframe how things are done in terms of council priorities of locality and partnership working.
- The Director informed the meeting that with the restructuring 90 management staff have had to reapply for their jobs and a reduction of 17 posts across the whole service area. The whole exercise has removed any duplication of roles and posts which were underutilised.

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- Members were informed that what is in place is that when residents call in to report an issue relating to tenancy or estate management, they will receive a universal service which is manned by office based Housing officers who are well equipped to respond instead of being dealt with the customer service officers at call centres.
- The meeting was informed that although the focus will be through the telephone rather than person, housing officers will be expected to go out in the community and meet residents.
- In response to a question on the support available to residents who require more engagement; have complex needs or mental issues, the Director advised that this will be managed through the Intensive Tenancy Sustainment Team , who in engaging colleagues in other areas of the council such as Adult and Social Services and Housing Needs will provide a wrap-around services that will be required.
- Members were informed that the Service has recently recruited the services of an ex-Superintendent police officer, a social worker, anti-social behaviour officers and a specialist with experience working with elderly residents into the Intensive Tenancy Sustainment Team with a view that this new way of working would ensure that experience and skills of these specialist with some knowledge of housing issues would be beneficial to address a number of issues such as anti-social behaviour and behavioural issues. Members were advised that the Service is about to embark on a soft launch of this new way of working with residents especially with the significant changes in housing personnel with different roles and responsibilities which residents are not aware of.
- With regards to the evictions reported in the press, the Director Homes and Communities informed the meeting that this was not related to a council tenant but Partners and Improvement. The meeting was informed that where there is rent arrears there is support in place for residents that engage with officers however in the very difficult cases, the Council would have to pursue their evictions after court proceedings.
- In response to a question, the Director reassured members that the Council has in place strict safeguarding criteria in place which prevents vulnerable residents from being evicted.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted.

141

WORK PROGRAMME 2019/20 (Item B3)

RESOLVED:

That the work programme be noted.

The meeting ended at 9.35 pm

CHAIR