

Housing Scrutiny Committee - 23 June 2020

Minutes of the virtual meeting of the Housing Scrutiny Committee on 23 June 2020 at 7.30 pm.

Present: **Councillors:** O'Sullivan (Chair), Lukes (Vice-Chair), Debono, Gallagher, Heather, Mackmurdie and McDonald (Co-Optee)

Councillor Michael O'Sullivan in the Chair

165 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Item 1)

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Spall and Hamitouche.

166 DECLARATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (Item 2)

None

167 DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS (Item 3)

None

168 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING (Item 4)

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 3 March 2020 be confirmed as a correct record and the Chair be authorised to sign them.

169 CHAIR'S REPORT (Item 5)

The Chair stated that Councillor Hamitouche was unwell and would not be attending the meeting that evening. The Chair added that on behalf of the Committee he would like to extend his best wishes for a speedy recovery, and thank her for the outstanding contribution she has made to the work of the Committee

The Chair also stated that this was the first virtual meeting of the Housing Scrutiny Committee, and that with regard to the future draft work programme, which would be considered later in the agenda he would like to propose the following –

- Additional scrutiny evidence to be received by the Chair/Vice Chair on the Capital Works and the Private Rented sector scrutiny reviews, and a written report be presented to the Committee thereon, summarising such evidence, with a view to reporting recommendations on these reviews at the next meeting;
- Consideration be given to a scrutiny review on Partners, especially in relation to the end of PFI2 and the possible arrangements for the properties coming back 'in house', and consideration be given to additional items on the work programme on Housing Associations and Homelessness. The Chair also

stated that there is a Task and Finish Group being established on how the Council's Housing stock can be made carbon neutral by 2030, and he felt that consideration should be given to this early next year by the Committee

RESOLVED:

- (a) That a vote of thanks be accorded to Councillor Hamitouche for her work on the Committee, and to wish her a speedy recovery from her illness
- (b) That the additional items raised by the Chair above, and the proposal for additional evidence in relation to the Capital Works and Private Rented sector be agreed
- (c) That it be noted that the proposals by the Chair in respect of a new Scrutiny topic, and additional items for agendas, as referred to above, be considered at the meeting in September

170 ORDER OF BUSINESS (Item 6)

The Chair stated that the order of business would be as per the agenda.

171 PUBLIC QUESTIONS (Item 7)

The Chair outlined the procedure for public questions

172 IMPACTS AND ADJUSTMENTS TO HOUSING SERVICES DURING THE PANDEMIC - PRESENTATION (Item B1)

The Corporate Director of Housing, Maxine Holdsworth, was present for discussion of this item and made a presentation to the Committee, copy interleaved.

During consideration of the presentation on COVID 19 the following main points were made –

- Staffing – the first 2 weeks of lockdown coincided with the last 2 weeks of the annual leave year. This reduced staffing levels to 70% but by mid-April this had risen to 85%. During May/June staff levels have remained stable at around 90% each working day. Only 13 staff have required a COVID 19 test since testing was made available to Council staff. Around 500 staff are working from home and there are just over 400 staff are on site or in the office (the vast majority in Estate Services, Repairs, and Tenancy Management).
- Maintaining Caretaking services – Caretaking service able to deliver service business as usual. Cleaning and disinfection increased in frequency to reduce virus spread risk. Staff require PPE to continue to work safely on estates. Staff adapted to new ways of working. Repairs staff redeployed to communal areas team to carry out communal work and support, whilst demand for repairs decreased
- Day to day repairs – Staff require PPE to work safely, and are amending procedures to keep themselves/residents safe. Council teams and contractors continued to deliver gas and heating repairs during lockdown. Staffing levels

had been good throughout. The service was now reopening to dealing with non-urgent repairs as residents are starting to report these.

- Continuing challenge to Gas compliance – Gas compliance was dropping due to lack of access. Some residents did not want to allow access to Gas Engineers in their home. Without means of enforcement persuasion is the only tool available.
- Income collection – Rent arrears have risen sharply. Some tenants had cancelled direct debits. The Government has suspended evictions and notice periods have been extended.
- Tenancy Management – Services have been adapted to enable home working for some staff whilst an office presence is maintained. Processes have been adapted to ensure safety. Property viewings are being conducted through video, and sign-ups over the telephone. Home visits were only arranged in an urgent situation.
- Continuing challenges – Collection of rent was an ongoing challenge. The Council had lobbied Government for an end to No Recourse to Public Funds. Individual debt was increasing quickly and HRA income loss will mean compensatory savings will need to be made elsewhere.
- Homelessness – There had been a surge in temporary accommodation placements, with an additional 250 singles accommodated. There was also increased demand for supported housing and support services. Services had moved to largely remote delivery, with a core team at 222 Upper Street and at reception centres. Temporary accommodation had to be accessed quickly and costs were higher than normal. Funding provided by the Government was inadequate to fully cover the council's costs. Exit strategies had been developed for each individual. The Council was lobbying government over clarity and further support for roughsleepers, and for those with No Recourse to Public Funds
- Challenges in Housing Allocations – Government rules dictated only urgent moves between 24 March-18 May 2020. Safety requirements stopped viewings so Choice Based Lettings had to be suspended. Of 50 properties let to 6 May, 6 were category 'A' welfare, 9 overcrowded, 5 under occupiers, 19 homeless, 8 others. It was anticipated that Choice Based Lettings would resume in September. New build properties would start to become available for letting soon.
- Supporting/shielding and Vulnerable households – The Director of Homes and Communities was leading the We Are Islington helpline. Staff from across the Council had been redeployed and trained to help deliver service. Deliveries of food, medicine, and utility top ups were arranged to support those shielding or vulnerable. The service went live on 21 May and received 10,000 calls to mid-June. Requests for help peaked in mid-May, and they have reduced to 25-40 requests a week. Sobell Leisure Centre had been utilised for food and meals distribution. Food deliveries were being made in partnership with the voluntary and community sector. A new CRM system had been developed to support We Are Islington. Arsenal had been very supportive throughout and discussions were taking place with them as to future developments.

Housing Scrutiny Committee - 23 June 2020

- Preparing for end of PFI 2 – A PFI end of contract board had been set up within Housing to oversee end of PFI2 contract and new arrangements for service delivery to these properties. Board included the Executive Member, senior Housing officers, and representatives from Digital Services, Legal, Finance, and Communications. It was essential to ensure that homes are returned in good condition and services handed over seamlessly. Arrangements were in place for a survey of PFI2 properties that was scheduled for April 2021. A communications plan, risk register, and programme plan had been developed to help monitor progress, mitigate risk, and ensure communication with residents is clear and timely.
- Members congratulated housing staff on the level of commitment shown during the pandemic, and felt that an awards ceremony or other recognition should be given to staff to recognise their efforts.
- It was noted that call centre staff at Brewery Road were working from home, and this has boosted the 'out of hours' offer for repairs.
- Some capital programme works had continued during COVID 19, however before all programmes restarted sites had to be COVID secure. The new build programme is back on 8 sites but anticipated finish dates may need to be amended due to social distancing measures on site.
- In response to a question on No Recourse to Public Funds, it was stated that a lot of work had taken place and many people had been accommodated. A programme of support was in place, and a triage system was in place to direct people to appropriate pathways, and additional staff had been taken on to assist the team. There was access to specialist legal and immigration advice. A total of 293 rough sleepers had been accommodated and 43 of these were NRPF or EA nationals. It was noted that details of the triage/pathways referred to could be discussed following the meeting and that Housing would contact Councillor Lukes thereon.
- A Member stated that he would wish to congratulate the Assistant Director of Housing Property Services, and the Repairs Team, on the excellent work that they had carried out during the pandemic, and added that he had received feedback from a number of residents to this effect.
- In response to a question, it was stated that payment of rent directly from DWP for tenants on Universal Credit only applied when the Council made an application once a tenant had fallen into arrears.
- Staff were carrying out tenancy welfare checks, however this was only being carried out in person when staff had not responded to e mails etc.
- In relation to videos for property viewings, this is seen as an additional service for tenants, and it was appreciated some tenants may have difficulties accessing these due to lack of available IT. Discussions were taking place to involve community organisations in offering access to IT and supporting the digital inclusion of residents.
- In response to a question it was stated that a number of adjustments had been made to ensure vulnerable staff were protected from COVID 19, including risk assessments, looking at functions and roles of individual staff, and discussions were taking place with staff on risk factors
- With regard to availability of PPE, it was stated that there had been problems but at no stage had it not been available to staff where required. The Council

had made a decision to centralise the purchase of PPE through the Emergency Planning Team, and there were supplies available, although these are not being stockpiled.

- It was noted that originally it was only NHS/Care staff eligible for COVID-19 testing and testing for local government staff was introduced at a later date. In terms of immunity, it was still not clear whether you could be re-infected, and such matters could have potential staffing implications in future.
- A member referred to the lack of voids/temporary accommodation in the south of the borough. It was stated the Council owned and managed 3 temporary accommodation sites in the borough, and one was located in the south.
- Reference was made to the issue of Council Tax Bands being higher on new build properties. It was stated that there was a formula applied when assessing Council Tax Bands on new builds, and this could be circulated to Members.
- A Member expressed concern that agency staff employed by Arsenal F.C. had not been furloughed. It was stated that this issue would be discussed outside of the meeting.
- In response to a question, it was stated that that there had been no increase in the level of voids during lockdown.

The Committee thanked officers for their contribution.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the presentation be noted;
- (b) That Arsenal FC be contacted re: the issue of agency staff, as referred to above;
- (c) That information on the calculation for new build properties Council Tax Bands, as referred to above, be circulated to Members;
- (d) That the Director of Housing contact Councillor Lukes in relation to triage and pathways for NRPF, as referred to above.

173 WORK PROGRAMME 2020/2021 (Item B2)

It was stated that the draft work programme for the next two meetings could be agreed however, due to the ongoing COVID 19 situation, and Annual Council now not being held until September, with the appointment of new Membership to the Committee, the consideration of a scrutiny review topic, and the future meetings work programme should be deferred until the September meeting

RESOLVED:

That the work programme be agreed, as stated above, and further considered at the September meeting

The meeting ended at 8.55 p.m.

CHAIR

