

London Borough of Islington

**Housing Scrutiny Committee - 23 July 2020**

Minutes of the Virtual meeting of the Housing Committee held on 23 July 2020 at 7.30 pm.

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

**Councillor Michael O'Sullivan in the Chair**

**174      APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Item 1)**

Apologies were received from Councillor Hamitouche and Dean Donaghey – Co-opted Member

**175      DECLARATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (Item 2)**

There were no declarations of substitute members

**176      DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS (Item 3)**

There were no declarations of interest

**177      MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING (Item 4)**

**RESOLVED:**

That the minutes of the meeting held on 23 June 2020 be confirmed as an accurate record of proceedings and the Chair be authorised to sign them.

**178      CHAIR'S REPORT (Item 5)**

The Chair stated that he was pleased to report that some Partner properties will be returning to the Council in April 2022 and he congratulated the Executive Member Housing for his work in this regard

**179      ORDER OF BUSINESS (Item 6)**

The Chair stated that the order of business would be as per the agenda, and that the item on Communal Heating Braithwaite House would be dealt with in conjunction with the Performance report from the Executive Member Housing

**180      PUBLIC QUESTIONS (Item 7)**

The Chair outlined the procedure for Public questions

**181      MINI-SCRUTINY REVIEW ( PRIVATE RENTED SECTOR) WITNESSES EVIDENCE - SAFER RENTING (Item B1)**

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Roz Spencer and Bob Reeves Lewis, Safer Renting, made a presentation to the Committee, copy interleaved

During consideration the following main points were made –

- Safer renting an overview – TRO tenancy advocacy provider, committed to change through research, Cambridge House support and Sister housing law centre. 4 years operational experience in 7 London Boroughs. Funded by borough contracts and charitable core funding. Independent, social enterprise organisation
- Strength in depth – services can include litigation friend defending against landlord claims, representation at Tribunals for civil redress, homelessness prevention, out of court settlements, client borough portal for online referrals to case management, GDPR compliant and ASQ accreditation
- 4.5 full time caseworkers
- Current developments – COVID 19, rise in illegal evictions and harassment, HMO's and Public Health, safer renting training by the MET
- What local authorities can do better – adopt better data sharing to target and detect unlicensed HMO's, work with the MET to enforce the Protection of Eviction Act and actively pursue prosecution of offenders
- Employ a TRO service
- Barriers to greater effectiveness – austerity has stripped Local Authorities of expertise in enforcement and tenancy rights, funding for enforcement needs to be 'pump primed', no duty on Police to enforce Prevention of Eviction Act. Carried out work with the Police in Waltham Forest and as a result over 1000 officers had been trained and since the training the Police had followed correct procedures
- Weak tradition of multi-agency working, regulatory arrangements not fit for purpose
- How could safer renting benefit – provide private tenants with access to their rights, savings on tenant advice, customisable access to expertise and capacity and ability to contribute to policy change through research
- It was noted that it was felt that new Government legislation to increase the number of storeys on properties without planning permission would exacerbate problems with rogue landlords
- Noted that the sentencing for illegal evictions is less than shoplifting
- Noted that landlords tended to fit in number of categories which were easily recognisable
- In response to a question about tracking landlords down it was stated that this could be difficult if the owner was clever in concealing his/her tracks, and the proliferation of letting agents made this more difficult. Noted that consideration was being given by the Government to hold agents responsible for offences being committed in relation to properties where applicable
- Reference was made to other enforcement powers under the Housing Act 2004, however a multi-agency approach is needed. Trading Standards in Islington had successfully made a prosecution resulting in a fine of £11000

- Councillor Ward referred to the Trailblazers scheme whereby Islington talked to landlords in an attempt to resolve problems before the eviction process starts and this had been successful in many instances
- It was stated that Islington Trading Standards have attempted to work on a multi-agency basis, and that two Police officers had joined the team, and that consideration was being given with Housing to look at letting agents
- In response to a question, it was stated that the report in relation to Safer Renting would be made available to Committee Members

The Chair thanked Roz Spencer and Ben Reeves-Lewis for their presentation and attending

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**SCRUTINY REVIEW ( MAJOR WORKS) - DRAFT RECOMMENDATIONS - TO FOLLOW (Item B2)**

The Chair stated that the draft recommendations were before the Committee for consideration

Members were of the view that the draft recommendations needed additional work, and that further consideration should be given to this with a view to reporting with draft recommendations to the Committee at the September meeting

It was noted that a number of major works had been delayed, in particular on the Andover and Girdlestone Estates, and this was not acceptable. Whilst there had been a need to change contractors, this should be planned in a more acceptable manner so that handover of contractors is as seamless as possible. Members were informed that delays had been experienced by the termination of the contract with Breyers, and there had been a need to employ new contractors

**RESOLVED:**

That the draft recommendations be noted and, following discussion between the Chair and Members of the Committee, further more detailed recommendations be submitted to a future meeting of the Committee for consideration

183

**REVIEW OF THE COUNCIL'S NEW PROGRAMME - 12 MONTH REPORT BACK (Item B3)**

Steve Nash, Housing Directorate, was present for discussion of this item and outlined the response to the Scrutiny recommendations

During consideration of the report the following main points were made –

- The Council new build programme was again now active on all sites following the COVID 19 lockdown ending
- Consultation and the planning process is also back on schedule
- The Chair enquired whether consideration had been given to approaching Housing Associations in neighbouring boroughs, or TMO/TMC's who often had considerable funding reserves in relation to the purchase of sites for housing in the borough. It was added that the borough needed genuinely

affordable rents, and that private housing developers are only considered in order that the scheme can maximise the number of social housing units available

- Members were informed that generally the Council tried to work with existing Housing Associations in the borough who had proved successful in delivering schemes, however consideration could be given to the Chair's suggestion in relation to Housing Associations in neighbouring boroughs referred to above

The Chair thanked Steve Nash for attending

**184 QUARTERLY REVIEW OF HOUSING PERFORMANCE REPORT (Q4 2019/2020) (Item B4)**

Councillor Diarmaid Ward, Executive Member Housing and Maxine Holdsworth, Corporate Director of Housing, were present for discussion of this item

Residents of Braithwaite and Councillor Graham were also present to discuss the Communal Heating issues at Braithwaite House

During discussion the following main points were made –

- It was noted that the Quarter 4 performance figures were before the outbreak of COVID 19, and therefore this would affect the next Performance information
- There were 24 affordable new homes completed this quarter
- The end of year new build target is slightly behind schedule, due to delays with sub-contractors and COVID
- No new planning permissions were granted for new Council housing, and this is slightly behind target
- The net growth of Council housing this quarter was 14, and this is below target
- 33 severely over-crowded households were assisted to relieve over-crowding, giving an end year total of 144, an improvement on last year
- 152 under-occupying households have been supported to downsize, slightly below target
- Repairs performance has continued to improve from 87.4% to 87.7%
- Partners repairs – these tend to be more complex major repairs and at present 17% of major works have been open for more than three months. Partners PFI 2 were to come back 'in house' from April 2022
- Rent Income Collection – Rent arrears have continued to increase from 3.6% at end December 2019 to 3.9% at the end of March. This is likely to increase further as a result of COVID 19
- Welcomed that the Parkhurst Road site would now be 50% genuinely affordable housing on site
- Reduce homelessness – the number of households accepted as homeless is better than the profiled target, and at 348 is above the equivalent position last year. Increase in numbers of households in temporary accommodation, however those in nightly-booked accommodation has reduced. The Council

had purchased additional accommodation, and pursuing the transition into permanent accommodation

- Residents of Braithwaite House and Councillor Graham outlined the unacceptable position with regard to the Communal Heating and other problems with hot water, thermostat for central heating, closing of windows, means of escape etc. many of which had first been raised in 2015, and still no action had been taken and that this was unacceptable. It was noted that a petition had been presented outlining the problems to the Council, and that it was unacceptable that there had been no heating on the estate and the Council had been slowing in responding to complaints. In addition, residents had requested a referendum takes place with regard to the heating situation, however it should be noted that this could result in increased costs if heating is left on for longer periods. The Director of Housing undertook to get accurate heating charging information for residents in time for such consultation in order that an informed decision can be made
- Councillor Ward expressed his deep regret to residents at the situation, and stated that he would undertake to ensure that the problems were resolved. Councillor Ward stated that he would also ensure a referendum of residents takes place as soon as possible on heating, however there were a number of other issues on the estate which would require other energy efficiency measures, and the Energy Doctor may be able to assist residents in this
- In relation to the other issues such as water pressure, thermostat for central heating etc. it was stated that the Director of Housing would discuss these with residents, and ensure remedial action is taken as soon as possible
- Councillor Gallagher stated that he would be willing to act as a 'conduit' for discussions between residents, Councillor Ward and the Director of Housing in relation to the referendum, and other issues on the estate
- Reference was made to the issue of communal boilers, and the efficiency of these. It was stated that tenants were paying £20 a week in some cases for heating, whereas other tenants were only paying £5, and this was unacceptable. The Director of Housing stated that over 4500 homes in the borough were heated through communal heating, and whilst when there were problems a large number of tenants were affected, such heating tends to be cheaper than individual boilers
- In response to a question as to when the Housing dashboard would be ready, it was stated that this had unfortunately been delayed by COVID 19, however an update would be provided to Members thereon
- Discussion took place as to the fact that L.B.Haringey had rehoused homeless people in a Premier Inn at Finsbury Park, and that this had increased problems with drugs in the area
- Members stated that they would wish to congratulate the Homeless Task Force for the work carried out during the pandemic, and that this had been a great success story, which the Council should publicise

**RESOLVED:**

- (a) That a referendum be held on the heating and other problems in Braithwaite House, and that the Director of Housing be requested to

provide details for the timetable for this to Councillors Ward and Gallagher as soon as possible, in order that residents of Braithwaite House can be informed

- (b) That the Director of Housing be requested to provide information on heating costs, as referred to above, to residents prior to the referendum in order that they can make an informed choice as to the options
- (c) That information on the latest position on the Housing Dashboard be circulated to Member
- (d) That the other issues referred to above on thermostats, water pressure, windows etc. be investigated and remedied as soon as possible and Councillors Gallagher and Ward be kept informed on progress to ensure residents are kept informed

The Chair thanked Councillor Ward for his presentation and Councillor Graham and residents of Braithwaite House for attending

**185 WORK PROGRAMME 2020/2021 (Item B5)**

The Chair stated that he felt that there should be consideration given to carrying out scrutiny reviews into Partners and Communal Heating in the next municipal year, and will consult with Members thereon

**RESOLVED:**

That the draft work programme be noted, subject to further consultation with Members on the proposed scrutiny reviews referred to above

The meeting ended at 9.40 p.m.

**CHAIR**