

London Borough of Islington

Housing Scrutiny Committee - 23 November 2020

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

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

Also Present: Councillor Ward

Councillor Michael O'Sullivan in the Chair

208 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Item 1)

Apologies were received from Councillor Hamitouche and Dean Donaghey.

209 DECLARATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (Item 2)

There were no declarations of substitute Members

210 DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS (Item 3)

There were no declarations of interest

211 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING (Item 4)

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 13 October 2020 be confirmed as an accurate record of proceedings and the Chair be authorised to sign them.

212 CHAIR'S REPORT (Item 5)

The Chair stated that the Housing White Paper and that the new Code of Governance for Housing Providers had been published. The Code of Governance, which whilst not having an impact on Council housing, would impact on registered providers

The Chair added that the proposed new Planning proposals would also have implications for social housing with the potential loss of SIL and section 106 monies, and that in future a detailed briefing may be requested by the Committee

213 ORDER OF BUSINESS (Item 6)

The Chair stated that the order of business would B2, B1,B3, B4 and B5

214 PUBLIC QUESTIONS (Item 7)

The Chair outlined the procedure for Public questions

215

MAIN SCRUTINY REVIEW : PLANNING FOR THE END OF THE PFI PROPERTIES IN 2022 - PRESENTATION AND TO AGREE SCRUTINY INITIATION DOCUMENT (Item B1)

Karen Lucas, Interim Director Housing Needs and Strategy was present and outlined her presentation to the Committee

During the presentation the following main points were made –

- The PFI Integration Board meets every two months to oversee the programme
- Membership of the Board included Councillor Ward, Director of Housing, Directors Home and Communities, Property Services, Housing Needs and Strategy and Integration Programme Manager, relevant Heads of Service, representatives from other key partners, including legal, finance and IT. This includes a number of work streams and those reporting into the Programme Manager
- Noted that the PFI2 contract ended with Partners in April 2022, and the properties would then come back to the Council. Consultation had taken place, and 92% of residents wanted the properties to come back under Council control from Partners
- It was stated that as the SID was a public document the acronyms used in the report should be replaced with a full description, so that is easier for the residents and Members to understand
- There were 9 work streams, and an officer had been appointed to ensure milestones were kept and to ensure delivery. A number of work streams were currently underway, and others due to come on board in the future
- To date progress against schedule is good, and it is anticipated that the survey on handback condition of properties would be completed before Xmas. A Member stated that the Council needed to ensure these properties were handed back in a good state of repair, as Partners often did not complete repairs in a satisfactory manner. It was stated that the contract with Partners was clear, and that properties should be handed back in a satisfactory condition. The Council had engaged an expert contractor to carry out the condition survey to ensure that this was the case
- In response to a question it was stated that Partner properties should meet the Decent Homes standard, however there is need to ensure that information is provided to the Committee during the scrutiny to ensure qualitative repairs had been carried out by Partners not just quantitative data
- It was stated that consideration would be given to staff transferring to the Council, in order to ensure that they were familiar with the Council's ways of working and where they were situated
- Reference was made to a number of issues that Partners tenants had with the quality of repairs, and that some cyclical works had not been undertaken 3 years after they were scheduled. In addition, Partners were not engaging tenants and also claiming they were having problems in doing this due to Zoom technology. The Director of Housing stated that she would investigate this

- A Member referred to a tenant who had not had a new bathroom for 30 years, and enquired as to the reason given Partners were supposed to have brought properties up to Decent Homes standards. It was stated that if details were provided the Director of Housing would look into this
- A Member referred to a number of instances where litigation by tenants was being taken out against Partners, and enquired once transfer had taken place if this would then be the Council's responsibility. It was stated that this issue was being looked at by Legal officers, and the situation could be reported at a future meeting
- Reference was made to which data would be transferring back to the Council from Partners on handover, and it was stated that this is under consideration to ascertain what information the Council required

RESOLVED:

That the following items be added to the SID for final approval –
Removal of the acronyms in the report and a brief description of these issues
Additional witnesses/organisations who specialise in maintaining and dealing with Victorian street properties be added to the list of witnesses
Residents/Leaseholders be added to the list of witnesses
Data required by the Council when Partners properties come back in house

The Chair thanked Karen Lucas for her presentation

216 TRIAGE SYSTEM - OFFICER UPDATE (Item B2)

Jo Murphy, Director Homes and Communities was present, and during her presentation the following main points were made –

- Noted that discussions had taken place with the Executive Member Housing, and Councillors, about the problems with the triage system. When the dedicated telephone line had been introduced in December 2019 it had not been anticipated that the service would be impacted by COVID 19, and this had presented challenges in dealing with the increased number of calls to the service
- There had been an increase of up to 6 times the number of calls received to the service, and there had also been challenges in training staff in new ways of working. However progress was being made, and staff who had been working from home had received support from IT, however it was accepted that the situation had not been acceptable. In the last 6 weeks however there had been progress in reducing the number of calls ended, and call waiting times
- Members were informed that a task and finish group had been set up to look at the issues and to ensure improvements in future
- It was noted that there had been a threefold increase in the number of residents calls and Member enquiries during the COVID period, and that measures were being put in place to remedy this, however numbers had now

reduced and the backlog was being dealt with. It was added that more detailed information could come to a future meeting

- A Member referred to the considerable problems with the service over the past few months and in some more complex cases, especially relating to mental health, he had spoken to a number of different officers and there seemed to be a lack of co-ordination in these cases. He added that there needed to be a 'flagging up' of such cases by officers, and an escalation of these cases where circumstances justified
- It was stated that there also needed to be a culture change, in order to ensure that there is more co-ordination between officers and Chairs of TMO's/TMC's on how the new triage system worked, and to engage the community, with identifiable front line officers who could be contacted

RESOLVED:

That a mini-scrutiny review be agreed on the Triage system, and a SID meeting be arranged between the Chair, Vice Chair and Councillor Gallagher with officers to discuss this and the draft SID then forwarded to the Committee for approval

The Chair thanked Jo Murphy for her presentation

**217 QUARTERLY REVIEW OF HOUSING PERFORMANCE (Q1- 2020/2021)
(Item B3)**

This item was taken in conjunction with agenda item B.4.- see Minute 218 below

**218 QUARTERLY REVIEW OF HOUSING PERFORMANCE (Q2- 2020/2021)
(Item B4)**

Councillor Diarmaid Ward, Executive Member Housing was present and outlined the report

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

- Members were informed that unfortunately 19 properties had been lost to social housing under Right to Buy, and that it was hoped that Right to Buy would be ended by this or a future Government. However, it was noted that the number of genuinely affordable new homes completed by developers was above target
- The number of overcrowded families assisted is also below target, and this was partly due to the challenges of moving people during lockdown
- LBI first time fix repairs had gone up to 92%, however this is partly due to the prioritisation of emergency repairs during lockdown, and these have a higher first time fix rate than the average repair. A Member stated that he welcomed this and lessons should be learnt
- Major works by Partners indicator is on target, but below the target of 15%, and the performance at the same time last year
- Rent arrears had increased to 4.5% due to COVID, and the Council were trying to assist residents as much as possible

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- Noted 78 street homeless had been supported into accommodation, and it hoped to build on this work. Additional monies had been provided by the Government, however this may not be sufficient
- A Member referred to the problems with EWS 1 forms, and that this needed to be resolved, as residents had been unable to get mortgage approval without these forms. It was stated that there were limited professionals who were able to complete EWS1 forms, however some mortgage lenders were accepting information from the Council, although this varied amongst mortgage lenders. The Government needed to resolve the situation, and work is taking place with local M.P.'s to lobby the Government in this regard. However, if residents were experiencing problems they could contact the Council for advice. The Chair stated that Inside Housing were looking at a campaign on this issue, and the Executive Member stated that he would investigate this
- Reference was also made to the letter sent out to tenants in relation to water bills, and that this had not been acceptable. The Executive Member stated that the letter had been sent without him approving it and apologised for this, however he stated that a new letter would be sent to tenants explaining the situation. This had arisen as a result of Court ruling stating that water bill charges must be sent separately from Thames Water in future, and not included on tenants rent charges. He added that the new letter would include a section on frequently asked questions, and a better communications strategy would be put in place. However, Council tenants would not have to pay additional charges at present, but he could not rule out that Thames Water would not increase their charges in future, however any increase would not be due to the Council
- Reference was made to whether waste water conservation could be considered for tenants, and the Executive Member stated that he would investigate this possibility
- In response to a statement, that the visit promised to Brewery Road to view the dashboard had not taken place, it was stated that the Executive Member would look into arranging a Zoom visit in the near future
- The Chair stated that he had seen a report on completion of complex repairs, and that this had shown that the Council had performed well in this regard, and that consideration should be given to publicising this
- The Chair also referred to the fact that the Committee would be considering the loss of social housing in relation to Housing Associations in the borough at a future meeting/s
- Reference was made to which future KPI's should be submitted to the Committee, and it was stated that the Executive Member would welcome any suggestions in this regard

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted and Councillor Ward be requested to arrange a Zoom meeting to view the Dashboard at Brewery Road

The Chair thanked Councillor Ward for attending

219 WORK PROGRAMME 2020/2021 (Item B5)

RESOLVED:

That, subject to the approval of a mini scrutiny item on the Triage system, the work programme 2020/21 be noted

The meeting ended at 9.15 p.m.

CHAIR