

London Borough of Islington

Housing Scrutiny Committee - 2 March 2021

Minutes of the Virtual meeting of the Housing Scrutiny Committee on 2 March 2021 at 7.00 pm.

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

Councillor Michael O'Sullivan in the Chair

234 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Item 1)

Apologies were received from Dean Donaghey

235 DECLARATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (Item 2)

None

236 DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS (Item 3)

None

237 PUBLIC QUESTIONS (Item 7)

The Chair outlined the procedure for Public questions

238 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING (Item 4)

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 12 January 2021 be confirmed and the Chair be authorised to sign them

239 CHAIR'S REPORT (Item 5)

The Chair welcomed Ian Swift, Director Housing Needs and Strategy to the meeting and that a number of questions would be sent to the Housing Associations regulator from the Committee in relation to the Housing Associations mini-review to be considered later in the agenda

The Chair added that he would also circulate to the Committee a copy of a report on a retrofit building in Aubert Park about the use of waste water, being recycled that if introduced in other properties could reduce residents water bills

240 ORDER OF BUSINESS (Item 6)

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

241 HOUSING ASSOCIATIONS IN ISLINGTON - TO FOLLOW (Item B1)

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Ruth Davison , Chair Islington Housing Group made a presentation to the Committee, copy interleaved, and during such presentation the following main points were made –

- Islington Housing Group are working towards a fairer Islington
- Priorities – Decent genuinely affordable housing, jobs and opportunities, safer borough for all, greener and cleaner Islington
- Strategic/policy and operational workshops – addressing the shortage of older people’s housing, impact of UC and supporting residents, building safety, discussions on Government white paper on evictions, making better use of homes, issues of concern such as disposals
- Safer borough for all – COVID, ASB, violence against women and girls, fostering, locality project
- Greener and Cleaner Islington – transport strategy, cycle storage, Islington sustainable energy partnership, Angelic Energy, Youth strategy, London Living Wage, Islington Giving
- What next – workshop progress for greening homes and climate emergency, Housing White Paper, Requirement for all homes to be EPC by 2030 and zero carbon by 2050, Building safety scandal, New affordable housing programmes, Planning White Paper, Helping communities after COVID
- In response to a question it was stated that there is not an equality of standards agreed as yet across Housing Associations, and it was likely that this would not be introduced for 2/3 years
- Noted that new KPI’s from the regulator would enable residents to compare Housing Association landlords
- Reference was made to the ESW1 forms and the issues with building safety and the difficulties faced by residents. It was stated that this issue varied hugely between Housing Associations and that there were only 300 certified staff available in the country to carry out necessary safety checks. Each check was extremely expensive and the checks that had been made to date had not found one block that conformed to the acceptable building standards. This was such a big issue that only the Government could resolve and there is a need for them to put an effective strategy in place
- The Chair stated that in his view Housing Associations did not lack funding resources, and that whilst the smaller Housing Associations appeared to generally work well the larger Housing Associations did not engage well with the Council or their residents. In addition, many did not provide properties at social rent but opted for affordable rent or shared ownership, which many people in London could not afford
- Ruth Davidson stated that her Housing Association, ISHA, did provide social rented housing, and this would be provided at the new development at Parkhurst Road, however she would refer these comments back to other Housing Associations on the Islington Housing Group

The Chair thanked Ruth Davidson for attending

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Jo Murphy, Kiran Aujla and Anna Turvey, Housing Services Directorate, were present and outlined the report and presentations to Members, copies interleaved

During consideration the following main points were made –

- The Housing Triage team was set up in December 2019 as part of the restructure of the previous tenancy management, anti-social behaviour and customer service teams within the Homes and Communities service in Housing. The aim of the restructure was to streamline and improve how housing management enquiries are dealt with across the service. This is a centralised borough wide service and the Triage team is the gateway and acts as a single point of contact into housing management services for Council tenants
- Prior to the launch of the Triage there were about 100 routes into the service and it was not possible to measure effectiveness, arrange cover or ensure consistency of service. The team triages all incoming enquiries and service requests by phone, e mail, correspondence, or e-form submitted through the Council's website
- The team triage all enquiries and carry out a rapid assessment to see if the enquiry can be dealt with fully at the triage team stage or should be passed to either the Targeted Team or Intensive Team. The Triage Team will establish via the triage process where a resident needs additional help, and escalation in a timely manner
- The Triage team will assess the nature and urgency of the request, urgency or complexity of the issue, needs and vulnerabilities of the individual making the request and this may require intervention of a specialist officer and the Triage team will escalate the query to the Intensive Team due to the vulnerability of the resident or seriousness of the enquiry
- The Housing feedback form was instituted in 2018 to manage the volume of members enquiries received. The aim was to ensure consistency in quality and speed of response times, and more robust data collection. The service also investigates and responds to complaints about the service, however in December 2020, in line with the Homes and Communities restructure, members enquiries and complaints were absorbed into the service
- Prior to the formation of the Housing Feedback team there were numerous entry points across the Directorate for members to submit enquiries and for residents to submit complaints without a single point of oversight of each function. The team provides a single point of contact for Councillors who have enquiries or who wish to address any issues raised by their constituents. The team is made up of experienced customer service officers, who will investigate complaints
- Performance indicators and service targets – Members enquiries 10 working days, Stage 1 complaints 15 working days, stage 1 complaint reviews 10 working days
- The Housing Feedback team is made up of 4 officers and manages a very high level of enquiries. During COVID there has been a significant backlog of increased casework, however despite this feedback on the service is good. Meetings are held bi-annually with the local MP's

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- In order to clear the backlog additional staff resources on a temporary basis were brought in at the beginning of 2021, and as of 18 February the team has completed 71% of Members enquiries and is on target to complete all outstanding casework by the end of March and casework will be closely monitored
- Responses are of a high quality and there is a single point of contact. The Feedback team is always available to receive enquiries and to escalate where necessary. Common examples include imminent evictions and risk of harassment and domestic violence
- Noted that calls had reduced to approximately 800 per week and the average wait time was around 2 minutes. Quality controls had also been introduced and additional resource had been brought in
- Noted that the local MP's had indicated that they were pleased with the quality of the service and response times
- A Member referred to the fact that whilst improvements had taken place residents did not necessarily feel these had taken place and that until KPI's were in place improvements could not be effectively judged
- In response to a question it was stated that a mix of staff were being employed that included staff with experience of mental health, domestic violence issues, as this provided a broader mix of skills across the team
- A Member expressed the view that it is important to be able to learn from any failures in the service which take place, and it was noted that the Triage system had taken this on board
- In response to a question it was stated that counselling and well-being measures were in place for staff suffering from the effects of the COVID period and the extra pressures this has placed on staff

The Chair thanked Jo Murphy, Kiran Aujla and Anna Turvey for attending

243 **QUARTERLY REVIEW OF HOUSING PERFORMANCE (Q3 2019/20) (Item B3)**

Councillor Diarmaid Ward, Executive Member Housing, and Maxine Holdsworth, Director of Housing were present and outlined the report

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

- Number of genuinely affordable homes completed indicator is behind target due to COVID, however the Council is still on target to meet its 2022 New Homes target
- Number of planning permissions agreed for new Council housing on target
- Number of genuinely affordable homes on target
- Number of severely overcrowded households assisted to relieve overcrowding ahead of target
- Number of under occupied households that have downsized slightly below target
- Repairs fixed first time on target with completion rate of 93.7%
- Major works – below target due to challenges during COVID 19

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- Rent arrears below target due to difficulties of residents during lockdown. Noted that the Government position on evictions would cause problems for many residents and it was likely rent arrears would also increase amongst Council tenants
- Number of street homeless supported into accommodation – ahead of annual target – 144 been supported into accommodation so far this year. Noted that additional accommodation had been purchased by the Council to rehouse street homeless, and there were only 3 rough sleepers requiring assistance at present
- Noted that a trip has been organised for Members to see the dashboard at Brewery Road
- Reference was made to the drop in performance on major repairs by Partners and Councillor Ward stated that he would investigate the reasons for this
- A member referred to rent arrears issues that he had been dealing with on residents on furlough and benefits, with mental health issues. Councillor Ward requested for details of the individual case be forwarded to him and he would look into it.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That member provide details requested above to the Executive Member of Housing for investigation
- (b) That Councillor Ward be requested to ascertain from Partners the reasons for the poor performance on major repairs

The Chair thanked Councillor Ward and the Director of Housing for the presentation

244 WORK PROGRAMME 2020/21 (Item B4)

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted

245 OTHER BUSINESS (Item)

Heating Failures – Redbrick/Braithwaite Houses

A Member expressed deep concern at the recent communal boiler heating failures at the above estates

Member stated that the failure of the heating and hot water had started on Thursday and despite the contractors assuring residents and Ward Councillors that the problems had been resolved the faults continued until Saturday evening. This caused considerable distress to residents and Ward Councillors were constantly engaged in efforts to try and resolve the problems

Meeting was advised that despite the contractor reassurance that the repairs had been resolved , the system failed within a few hours later and contractors unable to return for a long period as they claimed to be working on another job. Members

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expressed concern that a contractor should be able to manage two jobs at the same time, and that monies should be able to be recovered from contractors who do not fulfil their duties under the contract. He added that estates with communal boilers needed to have a back-up system in event of the communal boiler failing

Meeting was informed that Ward Councillors having met with officers the previous day, there was concerns about the attitude of officers, which was not acceptable as both residents and ward councillors expect a better level of service.

There were also concern that the Council appeared to be having two classes of estates, the new build and the old blocks, noting in particular the high rise blocks, which were old and beset with problems. Braithwaite House had continuing problems which had still not been fixed and this was unacceptable. Residents deserved a better level of service from the Council and were losing faith with the Council

A Member also stated that she had encountered problems in resolving an issue at the Stephens Ink Building with water egress to a residents flat and despite a number of complaints to Housing this had still not been resolved. The Director of Housing stated that she would investigate this if details were provided

The Executive Member Housing informed Members that a public meeting had been organised with residents, acknowledging that the situation that residents had faced was unacceptable. He also stated that there is a need for compensation to be made to affected residents and an action plan be put in place. With regard to the state of the older building blocks, members were advised that the Housing Delivery Board were investigating reallocation of funds to look at increasing the major works allocation, and that he would work closely with Ward Councillors, and ensure regular communication with residents

The Director of Housing referred to the fact that the communal system was installed in 2017 and was now out of the defect liability period. An investigation had taken place as to the reasons for the problems and it had been established that the fault was related to the Bunhill 2 connection and the new build at Redbrick Estate. The Director acknowledged that although communication with residents and the heating had been restored, however she accepted that residents had faced unacceptable problems

The Director of Housing stated the contractor had generally performed well, however in view of the problems on the Redbrick and Braithwaite Houses changes were being made to how such faults were dealt with in future

Member referred to the fact that the residents on Redbrick Estate had been living on a building site for a number of years because of the new builds. In addition he enquired why an e mail from an officer sent had removed the name of the Emily Thornberry MP concerning the problems. The Director of Housing stated that she would investigate this, however Emily Thornberry had been kept up to date with the situation

Thames Water

A Member expressed concern that following Thames Water attending the last meeting of the Committee that a letter should be sent by them to residents to inform them that were entitled to have a water meter installed

In addition it was stated that there is a need to survey the borough to ascertain where in the borough there was low and high water pressure as this is a problem, especially when considering new developments

Concern was also expressed that residents were receiving letters from Thames asking for them to complete a direct debit form to pay their bills without any idea of how much they will be charged

The Committee were informed that Thames had been requested to provide details of their communications plan to residents but this had still not been provided

RESOLVED:

That Councillors Ward and the Chair be requested to discuss the above issues and raise their concerns with Thames Water

The meeting ended at 9.30 p.m.

CHAIR