

London Borough of Islington

Housing Scrutiny Committee - 18 July 2022

Minutes of the meeting of the Housing Scrutiny Committee held at Council Chamber on 18 July 2022 at 7.30 pm.

Present: **Councillors:** Jackson (Chair), Bossman-Quarshie, Cinko-Oner, Gilgunn, Hamdache, O'Sullivan, Ogunro and Donaghey (Co-Optee)

Councillor Jason Jackson in the Chair

357 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Item 1)

Apologies were received from Councillor Spall and Co-Optee Rose McDonald.

358 DECLARATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (Item 2)

There were no declarations of substitute members.

359 DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS (Item 3)

There were no declarations of interest.

360 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING (Item 4)

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 22 June 2022 be confirmed as an accurate record of proceedings and the Chair be authorised to sign them.

361 CHAIR'S REPORT (Item 5)

The Chair on behalf of the Committee expressed their thanks to Maxine Holdsworth, Islington's Corporate Director of Homes and Neighbourhood for her 17 years service to the Council and in particular her support of the Housing Scrutiny Committee, wishing her well in her new position as the Chief Executive of the Kensington and Chelsea Council.

362 ORDER OF BUSINESS (Item 6)

The order of business would be as per the agenda.

363 PUBLIC QUESTIONS (Item 7)

None

364 MAIN SCRUTINY REVIEW - STRATEGIC REVIEW OF OVERCROWDING IN ISLINGTON - TO AGREE SCRUTINY INITIATION DOCUMENT AND RECEIVE PRESENTATIONS (Item B1)

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Ian Swift, the Director of Housing Needs presented the Scrutiny Initiation Document, copy interleaved and the Committee received 2 presentations regarding Overcrowding in Islington and the following issues were highlighted:

The Director advised that following Committee decision to review overcrowding in Islington, a draft Scrutiny Initiation Document has been produced with details on how the exercise will be carried out.

Members were advised of the scope of the review, that the review involves taking evidence from external organisations and analysing data to help understand the scale of overcrowding in the borough and the impacts of overcrowding on residents health, education attainment, well-being, housing conditions, safety and the wider impact on the community. Evidence will be taken from different stakeholders such as Islington officers, RSL, statutory agencies such as Children Service's tenants, Adult Services, Health Agencies etc.

Ramesh Logeswaran, Head of Housing Needs gave a presentation and the following points were highlighted:

- Overcrowding is categorised as a household needing one additional bedroom and severe overcrowding is when a household requires two or more additional bedrooms.
- Overcrowding needs to be tackled as it is associated with increased physical and mental health problems, poorer educational achievement by children, increased risk of infectious or respiratory diseases, increased risk of accidents and fires, reduced stature in children. It is also evident that poor diet and nutrition is higher in people living in overcrowded conditions which can have an impact on family life and relationships which in some instances lead to family breakdown and increased social tensions with neighbours.
- Overcrowding may be as a result of a number of factors including family size growth with additional children, other wider family members joining the existing household, guardianship orders and foster arrangements etc
- Housing Needs supports families in overcrowded households, providing advice on mutual exchanges as one of the best ways for tenants to alleviate their overcrowding irrespective of housing points awarded. Advice is provided on how to prevent damp and mould formation as well as support to rent storage space from the council and to manage energy costs.
- For severely overcrowded tenants, the service can arrange for the provision of space saving furniture to alleviate the effects of severe overcrowding, undertake home visits with tenants to signpost tenants to other services e.g. Social Care, Bright Spark, SHINE, Property Services (re repairs).
- Advice is also provided on bidding, local letting schemes and mutual exchanges
- The Service supports downsizers to move to create voids, in particular offer personalised service to support tenants who are typically vulnerable through the process of downsizing. This generally comprises advanced identification of properties and joint viewings with tenants.

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- To promote downsizing, there is also support with financial incentives for each room 'released', support to access a decoration allowance, moving support, utilities re-connections etc.
- Mutual exchanges is a great way for residents to downsize, thereby releasing their larger home for a larger household. Housing Needs support tenants who wish to exchange properties with another social housing tenant and this is a joint exercise between Housing Needs and Homes and Communities.
- Within Housing Needs, officers advise residents on how to register online for the service and explain how tenants can entice others registered looking to move. There are also incentive provisions around decorative/white goods, what is referred to as 'works in occupation'
- In terms of performance, the meeting was advised that the Service was unable to meet its target of assisting both overcrowded families and underoccupiers move into appropriate or suitable housing, however it met its target for moving households into appropriate housing via mutual exchange.
- The demand for social housing is on the rise due to high rents in the private sector, 2922 households approached the council for advice during 2021/22 financial year.
- In June 2022, 907 households live in temporary accommodation, of which 472 households are living in private sector accommodation. As of April 2022, 15,402 households are on the housing register.
- In 2021/22 financial year, the council let 829 LBI (Islington Council) properties and 193 Housing Association properties totalling 1022 properties.
- Meeting was advised that in 2021/22, 30% of lettings were social housing tenants moving home, 36% to homeless households and 34% are to households on the Council waiting list.
- Members were informed of the budgetary pressures on the Housing General Fund with the result that the Service will need to significantly reduce the number of households in private sector temporary accommodation to below 300.
- With regards to the 39 Islington Council New builds in 2021/22, meeting was advised that 9(23%) allocated to downsizers, 8(21%) to tenants seeking a transfer from their existing homes,11(28%) were for like for like transfers and not regarded as overcrowded and 11(28%) were let to applicants on the housing register.
- Meeting was advised that of the 28 Social housing transfers, multiple chain of moves were progressed leading to households in housing need being placed in suitable homes and this comprises of both overcrowded and severely overcrowded families, homeless families, downsizers, tenants with significant health and welfare issues, domestic abuse survivors, new generation scheme and care leavers.
- In the case of the 16 Housing Association new builds, 5 were let to waiting list cases, 8 were for overcrowded of which 2 were severely overcrowded, 1 for welfare/medical, 1 for medical/wheelchair need and 1 for downsizer.

Helena Stephenson, Islington's Head of Housing Partnership informed the meeting of the issues of overcrowding from the tenants perspective and they include :

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- 1396 LBI Overcrowded tenants are registered for rehousing due to fire safety concerns, noise and anti-social behaviour complaints and other wellbeing and safeguarding issues. Another reason for seeking to move is related to damp and mould and additional 'wear and tear' repairs
- Meeting was advised that with regards to fire safety, there is a Fire Risk Assessment programme to address items left in communal areas and associated Fire Safety advice which promotes storage solutions.
- A suggestion to include as part of the review exercise community groups such as the Somali Welfare Centre was noted. Officers were advised to contact GLA about the Seaside and Community Homes Schemes which provides social housing for over 55's.
- The Director acknowledged that overcrowding is a national crisis and as the private sector is unable to meet high demand for housing there will always be instances of overcrowding in households and only building more homes will address this issue.
- On the issue of living rooms being designated as a bedroom, the Director noted that legislation dates back to 1950's and successive governments have not passed a new legislation.
- With regards abandoned properties, meeting was advised that the Council will have to investigate the circumstances first as in some cases tenants may be admitted to hospital temporarily or Nursing homes, after which the property can then placed into void status.
- On the issue of language being a barrier for tenants interested in mutual swaps, the meeting was advised that the Council has a team in place and information is available online.
- Meeting was informed that the Service works with its housing partners to address overcrowding and especially in identifying voids.

The Chair thanked Ian Swift, Ramesh Logeswaran and Helena Stephenson for their presentations.

RESOLVED:

- That the Scrutiny Initiation Document be agreed subject to inviting representatives of community groups as part of the review and for officers to liaise with GLA officers on any funding/initiative available to address overcrowding.
- That the presentations be noted.

365

HOUSING REPAIRS - OFFICER UPDATE (Item B2)

Matt West, Director Housing Property Services gave a presentation, copy interleaved on the repairs carried out on the Council Housing stock. The following issues were highlighted:

- Repairs of Council owned properties include plumbing, electrical, gas and carpentry which are completed within either 2 hours, 24 Hours or 20 Working Days.

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- The majority of repairs are carried out in house, the council employs 160 direct operatives and 32 contractors to carry out the repairs with over 75,000 repairs completed every year (more in 2021-22).
- The Service is primarily focused on customer service and resident safety.
- In terms of performance targets , meeting was advised that although first time fixes for the 2022/23 financial year is lower comparable to the 2021/22 however it is still on target.
- It was noted that Repairs is dependent on the call handling personnel and it is noticeable that performance for the 2022/23 year is on target.
- On the issue of resident satisfaction about repairs undertaken. feedback from residents, compiled by an independent company shows that the Service is on target.
- The 3 main priorities of the Service are providing best experience for residents, creating opportunities for residents and improving diversity and better communication
- On the issue of providing best experience for residents, the meeting was advised that the Service recently undertook mystery shopping exercise which identified a number of learning, such as sharing complaints with resident's panel and also providing better communications to residents and councillors especially during large repair incidents
- In terms of creating opportunities for residents and improving diversity, meeting was advised that Improvers Role has been created and the Service is using Housing Ambassadors Programme and local initiatives to increase representation within the work force. In addition to this the Service is offering work experience, apprenticeships and training to not only Islington residents.
- Meeting was advised that there is scope for better communication on all aspects of repairs, with the online translation service called 'big word' and also the Service has introduced the 'what next card' for repair operators when work is uncompleted and requires a follow on.
- In terms of operations, the Director updated the meeting that recently following the Ombudsman Damp Report, that a programme of work is to be commissioned over the summer to compare report recommendations to current process, that there are plans to pilot of an app, Localz to improve the resident experience which is to be rolled out Autumn 22.
- In terms of Insourcing, meeting was informed Set up voids team and PF12 team in 2022. Working with estate champions to provide opportunities to feedback on service
- Fire Safety is of huge concern, that there are lots of new responsibilities, that a new team for compliance has been established and the Service has started pilot of door checks.
- Meeting was informed that in light of the new Housing Regulator, the Service is working as part of large Service Improvement Programme to ensure that regulators standards are exceeded
- It was also noted that in light of the cost of living crisis, prices are rising and causing pressures on contractors and budgets.

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- Meeting was advised that repairs are up approximately 10% compared to pre covid period.
- The Service is working with Capital Delivery to deal with complex jobs in a better way as these tend to be the areas generating complaints
- Meeting was advised that following a review in to repairs some years ago, there have been a number of improvements such as ,The ring and Bring Service is now fully imbedded with voids, the use of Electronic Notice Board (ENB), a new phone systems to improve user experience, the Improver Pilot has been completed and roll out of wider programme due this year.
- Members were reminded that following the review , other improvements include having a Leak team in place to deal with complex leaks, that the new online systems Localz is being tested this year, New Materials and practice group to agree materials between New Build, Capital and Repairs.
- Meeting was advised that during Covid period, repairs operated with minimal disruption to residents, however not the case with the call handling centres in comparison to when operatives operated from the office. It was noted that operatives were incredibly brave by undertaking repairs in PPE so as not to compromise residents welfare carrying out work.
- The Director acknowledged that the Service is not just a 'Repair Service' that it undertakes DIY Work shops and job taster sessions run on estates and offers work placements.
- On the issue of Improvers and internal development, 2 Repairs Coordinators have been trained to become surveyors, 1 Driver trained to be a plumber, 2 operatives trained as surveyors, multiple operatives trained and successful in obtaining management roles and multiple apprentices are in a number of trades
- In light of the Ukraine/Russia, Repairs staff undertook over 200 property surveys in a 6 weeks.
- The Director highlighted the DAHA , domestic abuse support accreditation which Islington received in December 2021, in regards to Repairs approach and response to helping prevent domestic violence.
- The Service welcomes resident feedback, noting that residents can contact the Service directly to provide feedback and would encourage residents interested in procurement contract management to join Islington Panels involved in selecting contractors and managing them.
- With regards to Service Improvement Panels, the Service welcome resident feedback on ideas for service improvement. Also meeting was advised that residents are encouraged to become mystery shopper and to drop in to events and big community events to provide feedback and engagement.

The Chair thanked Matt West for the update noting that there is a likelihood that this issue will be revisited later in the municipal year subject to Committee's workload.

RESOLVED:

- That the presentation be noted.

366 **HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - WORK PROGRAMME 2022/23 (Item B3)**

RESOLVED:

That the work programme be noted

The meeting ended at 9.15 pm

CHAIR