

Housing Scrutiny Committee - 1 December 2022

Minutes of the meeting of the Housing Scrutiny Committee held at Council Chamber, Town Hall, Upper Street, N1 2UD on 1 December 2022 at 7.30 pm.

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

Councillor Jason Jackson in the Chair

13 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Item 1)

Apologies were received from Councillor Spall.

14 DECLARATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (Item 2)

There were no declarations of substitute members.

15 DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS (Item 3)

There were no declarations of interest.

16 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING (Item 4)

Meeting was advised that the Housing Allocation Scheme will now be scheduled for the Committee meeting in February 2023 following its consideration at the Executive meeting in January 2023.

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 20 September 2023 be confirmed as an accurate record of proceedings and the Chair be authorised to sign them subject to the amended date when the allocation scheme report is to be considered by the committee.

17 CHAIR'S REPORT (Item 5)

The Chair informed the meeting that Cllr O'Halloran Executive Member for Housing and Communities will be providing an update to Committee on the Council's response to Damp and Mould concerns within its Council's housing stock.

Meeting was advised that although item is not scheduled for consideration at this meeting, it has been accepted as an urgent item

18 EXTERNAL ATTENDEES (IF ANY) (Item 6)

None

19 ORDER OF BUSINESS (Item 7)

The Chair agreed to alter the order of business, that the urgent item from the Executive Member will be taken after item B1.

Members were informed that some of the items is to be deferred to the next meeting.

20 PUBLIC QUESTIONS (Item 8)

None

21 EXTERNAL ATTENDEES (IF ANY) (Item 9)

None

22 MAIN SCRUTINY REVIEW: STRATEGIC REVIEW OF OVERCROWDING IN ISLINGTON - PEABODY HOUSING ASSOCIATION AND ISLINGTON NEW BUILD TEAM (Item B1)

Committee received a presentation from Tracy Packer, Managing Director for North East London, Peabody Housing Association on its management of overcrowding issues. The following points were highlighted:

- Peabody has 5500 homes across the borough with the majority being let at social rent, that currently 382 Peabody households in Islington have applied to move because of overcrowding and this would include households who have a need to move for other reasons such as medical/health needs, welfare and those fleeing domestic violence.
- Peabody provides support to residents throughout the move process however, the number of empty homes available is limited and the wait can be lengthy.
- In the year 2021/22 only 14 x larger homes became available in the borough (3/4 bed)
- Meeting was advised that the number of lettings completed is driven by the availability of homes, that Peabody completed 115 lettings in 2021/22, however majority of these lettings were for 1 and 2 bed homes and that empty homes are let through working in partnership with LBI via nomination's agreement.
- LBI receive 100% nomination rights of all 1st lets (new homes), 50% of studio/1bedroom relets and 75% of 2 bedroom or larger relets and that Peabody residents who have requested a move are considered when a relet becomes available and a priority move list for those in most need.
- Move applicants are assessed based on need and are prioritised, that those overcrowded by 2 or more bedrooms are in the B4 priority band, those in an under-occupying household who wish to move are given a C1 priority band enabling Peabody's larger homes to be allocated to more suitably sized households.
- Presently of the current households requesting to move because of overcrowding, 32% are in the B4 priority band needing 2 or more further bedrooms with 68% in need of 1 further bedroom.

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- Peabody offers a number of solutions and mitigations to address overcrowding for households requesting a move, whether in a priority band or not, and are supported through the bidding process however where there is long waiting times further support is provided.
- Peabody promotes mutual exchange for its tenants, provide advice and guidance on the opportunities that a mutual exchange can bring and make it easier to engage with the process. This includes providing information in multiple languages.
- 1-2-1 advice sessions is also available where in-house experts in rehousing offer support in finding alternative accommodation through other tenures such as shared ownership, market rent and potential moves to areas with lower housing demand. Members were reminded that this option is customer led and possible options will depend on customer requirements.
- Home visits to residents is undertaken and provides support such as offering possible space saving furniture to alleviate some shared sleeping arrangements. Also in light of the ongoing living costs concerns Peabody officers offer advice to help manage energy costs and other costs of living.
- Peabody takes a broad view on other actions to help alleviate overcrowding, by offering incentives such as financial incentives in the form of providing decoration allowance for residents who want to move and assist with moving for those willing or wanting to downsize. Peabody is interested in the support and promotions for downsizers being led by LBI.
- Peabody also takes a flexible approach, for example in a case of 2 residents, mother and daughter both living in different 3-bed homes on the same street and elderly mother requiring care, a request received from her adult daughter for them to move in together as joint tenants, clearly created a vacancy of a 3 bed home.
- Also customers in need of a home with 3+ bedrooms are able to bid for a home with one fewer bedroom even if this results in a low level of overcrowding.
- Meeting was informed of the 'Next Steps' scheme, which offers households overcrowded by 2 or more bedrooms with household members who are 21+ having grown up there as their principal home, will be considered for moving to a 1 bed accommodation.
- In summary Peabody aims to use its housing stock in the most effective way to meet housing need, actively support tenants requesting a move to assist in finding the option that will work best for them. The lack of larger homes means waiting times for a move can be lengthy.
- With regards to nomination rights for the Holloway Prison site which recently was granted planning permission for social housing, meeting was advised that Islington Council has 50% for 1 bedroom and 75% for 2 bed while the rest is for Peabody residents.
- Meeting was advised that any decision to sell or dispose of any property within Peabody's portfolio is not taken lightly and each case is assessed in terms of its cost in restoring the property to a decent standard, cost of maintenance over a long period and the condition of the property. The Managing Director assured the meeting that selling of properties only occurs

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in very small instances, noting that over the next few years Peabody will be building new social housing on the Holloway site

- On the fire safety concerns which resulted in residents of Merry Mews being moved into temporary accommodation while being resolved, the Managing Director acknowledged that lessons had been taken on board going forward by both Peabody and the builders/developers.
- There is a recognition that the offer of shared ownership to social housing tenants and its affordability as a means of addressing overcrowding was not ideal but was an option for those interested.
- On the question of whether Peabody had a list of those residents who had to take time off work so that the rectification process could be carried out, the Managing Director advised that the information can be provided for committee and that most works were carried out after consulting with affected residents to minimise disruption to their daily lives.
- In response to a question on whether Peabody's Holloway site had future proofed some of its properties for disabled tenants, the Managing Director acknowledged that a number of homes will be specifically adapted to such residents.
- In response to concerns raised by Jermyn Corbyn MP for Islington North about Pitt House , leased by Peabody from a Freeholder property managed by an agent, a 2yrs old new build affected by 3 issues relating to pumps and drainage causing sewage leaks which had not been resolved, the Managing Director acknowledged that residents welfare is the sole responsibility of Peabody and it is working hard to resolve the issues with both the builder and are in discussion with Thames Water to resolve the issue.
- Jeremy Corbyn MP was also concerned with Peabody's response to complaints raised by Landsdowne court residents of being subjected to racist behaviour to which Peabody was describing it as anti-social behaviour and requesting that this issue needs to be revisited and resolved by Peabody quickly.
- On the financial incentives for those willing to downsize, the meeting was advised that besides the decoration allowance and assistance with moving, Peabody are having ongoing conversation on what more can be done on this issue.
- In response to the precise siting of Peabody properties in the borough, the managing director indicated that detailed information can be provided.
- On the question of compensation for affected tenants being moved into temporary accommodation, meeting was advised that tenants receive subsistence allowance which is paid in advance and also cover taxi fares, noting that this figures can be provided. Peabody engages in individual arrangements with tenants and not necessarily offer a standard amount.
- The Chair thanked the Managing Director for her attendance and the presentation noting that Peabody has agreed to attend a future meeting possibly in February when the performances of housing associations will be considered.

RESOLVED:

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- That the presentation be noted
- That information details of Peabody's compensation scheme, a more detailed map about location of Peabody properties and its housing mix on the Holloway scheme be provided

Also Committee received a presentation from Alistair Gale, Islington's Assistant Director of Housing, Programming, Design and Customer Care on how its programme of building new homes help alleviate the shortage of housing especially in the context of overcrowding concerns. The following points were highlighted:

- It is a well known that the present housing crisis exists not only locally but nationally, that there is a desperate shortage of genuinely affordable homes, to which the Council has embarked on its biggest council-house building programme in the borough for a generation, which aims to meet the needs of residents.
- Local council tenants have priority for new council homes through the Council's Local Lettings Policy and that New council homes are under construction at 12 different locations across the borough, that presently 750 new council homes have either been completed or under construction for the period 2023-27.
- The new homes could be used to move a growing family into a larger home or downsizing an older person into ground floor, accessible housing.
- Meeting was advised that there are currently 371 council tenants registered for a housing transfer who are under-occupying their current home and it is estimated that there could be 3000 tenants who under-occupy their current home who are not registered for a housing transfer.
- In terms of New build delivery, meeting was advised that of the New council homes completed, 77% are 2+ bedrooms, 27% 3+ bedrooms and the rest one bedrooms
- Meeting was informed that presently 257 new council homes are under construction.
- In tracking housing needs trends, it was acknowledged that these change over time e.g. wheelchair accessible housing need is now for 3 and 4 bed properties, which the Council tries to accommodate in its pipeline programme.
- Residents feedback is important and taken on board. Meeting was advised that although residents may not be on the transfer list waiting to downsize, they might be encouraged if there is an opportunity to move into a smaller, attractive, energy efficient and high quality new build home
- As Islington is a dense urban borough, any infill housing on existing estates requires carefully considered design to optimise the available land without over-densification and some sites are not suitable/appropriate for houses such as undercroft garages/roof top developments
- Dover Court was highlighted as an example of a typical large infill project which delivered 57 new council homes for 197 local people, 16 of which were 3 bedroom houses, 2 x 5 bedroom houses and 1 ground floor wheelchair accessible 5 bedroom home. The scheme has been built across under-used

parts of the estate, including replacing derelict garages and a block of old bedsits.

- Members were advised that 8 new homes were allocated to local residents downsizing, 18 new homes were allocated to families from overcrowded accommodation, an example of replacing low quality existing accommodation and optimising the available land for family-sized homes and that occupants from the bedsit block were rehoused into a new over-55s block, which also encouraged others to downsize.
- Households who meet the bidding threshold will be able to bid for the new homes before anyone else in the borough.
- The applicant bidding with the highest number of points, subject to matching the size and any other characteristics of the property in question, will be offered the property first.
- Wheelchair adapted properties will be restricted to applicants who require such properties.
- Ground floor properties will be restricted to applicants with an assessed need for ground floor accommodation.
- The meeting was advised of the difficulty of finding brownfields to build social housing, as land in the borough is rare, that the latest acquisition was the Holloway prison site. In the case of Parkhurst Road site, meeting was advised that freehold is not owned by council, has been recently challenged in the courts, noting that the council has been able to ensure that going forward if developers were to build homes on the site they would have to meet the councils criteria on provision of social housing.
- Although the Council is considering at other options beyond building new homes on garages however due to affordability of land, the council is only able to build social housing on its own land.
- With regards to downsizing, meeting was advised that the process is customer led, that the council does not force any of its residents to move into smaller homes.
- On whether council was actually building the right type of properties and in the right location and if data used to ascertain housing needs was up to date, the manager advised that at the early stage of feasibility, the new build team considers existing data from colleagues in the housing needs team who have information on live transfer request, the ages of children across the estate etc, essential information which helps to determine what type of housing is needed , it's mix and in what location. Also council's regular engagement with resident is valuable in assessing housing requirements.
- The Director acknowledged the difficulty of building social homes in the borough, that it is difficult to get a perfect fit in terms of housing mix, which is not the case with outer London boroughs where land is not an issue, as Islington is constrained and is a dense urban environment, factors which determines the type of mix of housing being built on individual schemes.
- On the question of the 188 void properties in the borough and why it has not brought back to use, meeting was advised that officers will provide and circulate reasons to committee on why it has not put back onto the housing

stock, noting that some of the properties are likely to be properties that were brought back in house following the end of PFI 2.

- On a suggestion that cases such as Poplar estate which received planning permission for 2 x 2 bedrooms and 38 x 1 bedroom, and then subsequently received funds from GLA should have been revisited by the Planning Committee, the officer advised that S73 is not applicable to minor amendments as this would be a change in the description of the scheme, that it could not be used to change the number of dwellings of the scheme.
- Cllr Ward acknowledged that going forward the council would look to revisit schemes like the poplar estate in terms of housing mix however in this instance there was a deadline that required planning permission.

RESOLVED:

That the presentation be noted and officers to provide information as noted above.

23

PRIVATE RENTED SECTOR - 12 MONTH REPORT BACK (Item B2)

Islington Director Housing Needs and Strategy informed the meeting that the report before the committee is an appraisal of the state of play in the private rented sector, that report has been produced in conjunction with other colleagues in other departments of the council

- On the question of the role of register of private landlords, meeting was advised that committee will receive an update in February 2023 on what has been done.
- With regards to concerns raised by Shelter that only 1 out of 12 young people in private sector who get evicted receive detailed information on their rights and what to do, meeting was advised that council will be doing some work on the website regarding private renters after the public consultation exercise has been completed as it is important for young people and other stakeholders to know their rights.
- On the issue of HMO licensing and whether Islington Council charges less than neighbouring councils Hackney and Camden and if Council has any plans to review the charges, meeting was advised that comparison data of neighbouring boroughs will be made available to members.

24

PRIVATE RENTED SECTOR HOUSING CHARTER (Item B3)

The Director Housing Needs and Strategy informed the meeting that draft document has been discussed across the council and it goes out for public consultation for a period of 8 weeks from January 2023, to be adopted by Council after taking on board comments from all the different stakeholders.

- Meeting was advised that there is significant time and opportunities for any amendments to the draft charter and that it has been published on the council website.
- A representative of the Islington London Rental Union (LRU) informed the meeting that having spoken to council officers about the draft charter, the

LRU noted that most of their views had been taken on board in the draft document, however noting some distinctions.

- LRU's view is that the tone of the draft charter was a bit pessimistic, for example where LRU request the need to ensure the provision of social housing in new developments, the charter talks about promoting social housing.
- Also LRU's request to publish targets on how council deal with landlords was not evident, the charter only mentions data when it should be about enforcement of existing housing standards. There is also concern that charter makes reference to providing safer and decent accommodation, which is a minimum requirement, when more could be done.
- LRU are of the view that the charter needs to be bolder, disappointing that there is no reference to retro fitting, increasing the standard management of energy efficiency and concerns about the removal of the wording in relation to landlord illegal eviction.
- The charter should be an opportunity to shape landlord behaviour through council action, to ensure that Islington is a borough which welcomes renters and not one that preserves landlord behaviour.
- It was also stated that the Charter should provide more clarity on working with tenant resident organisation and disappointing not to see this forum acknowledged in the draft charter, that this omission in the draft charter is not sufficient in response to the crisis that private renters face.

RESOLVED:

That the Draft Charter be noted and welcome suggestions during its public consultation.

25 TENANT SATISFACTION MEASURES GOVERNMENT CONSULTATION (Item B4)

The Director Housing Needs and Strategy advised the meeting that a further update will be provided at a future meeting as recent information from the Housing Regulator regarding damp and mould is not reflected in the report before committee.

In addition to the above, Officer advised that the report will be recommending that this measure be included as part of the quarterly performance report.

RESOLVED:

Item was deferred to the next meeting.

26 ISLINGTON BROADBAND (Item B5)

RESOLVED:

Item was deferred to the next meeting

27 URGENT ITEM - DAMP AND MOULD IN ISLINGTON COUNCIL HOUSING (Item)

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Councillor Una O'Halloran, Executive Member for Homes and Communities highlighted the following actions which Council proposes to carry out in addressing the issues of Damp and Mould within its housing stock.

- Council will recontact all tenants who had previously requested a damp and mould survey in the last two years, and works will be prioritised based on number of the reports, vulnerabilities and complaints. Additional resources will be brought in to carry out home visit where this has been an issue.
- All reported complaints over the last 2 years, including members enquiries and resident reported cases of condensation, damp and mould will be reviewed, identifying what additional interventions could be made to address and resolve the issue and this may include additional works such as new ventilation or insulation.
- Members were advised that presently the council has already conducted work to reduce the likelihood of damp and on the most effected estates and further investment is ongoing, that the Council will continue to use repairs data to source estates that need investment to reduce the chance of damp and mould.
- Council is working with health partners to overlay information about families with health conditions that may require repairs to go even further in those houses to prevent damp and condensation
- In addition to the above, the repair service is investigating the greater use of remote loggers to help diagnose the cause of damp in properties.
- The Council will be setting up a dedicated phone line and email contact for residents concerned about damp and mould which will offer advice, the ability to report concerns and book a surveyors visit.
- Meeting was advised that a weekly panel will be set up to review cases of repeat reports of damp and mould with a view to sending senior surveyors and or increasing the levels of work or moving the family into temporary accommodation while work is being carried out.
- Council is working with local housing associations, encouraging them to take a similar proactive approach.
- The Council is working with University College London and Building Expert Mike Parrett to ensure that the best investigative techniques are employed and also in designing an affordable retrofit package for the worst cases.
- In terms of investment, the Executive Member noted that given the councils varied stock, some properties have a higher chance of getting damp and mould than others however the Council will continue to invest capital funding to improve all of its housing stock.
- On the issue of window and boiler replacements, the Council will ensure that capital works consider water supply pipes and wastes that may be past their serviceable life so as to prevent leaks.
- Members were advised of dedicated programme to reduce damp and leaks at Girdlestone which has been completed and the pilot at the Andover Estate have been completed.
- The Council is seeking grant funding to improve insulation and heating across its housing stock.

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- It was noted that repairs call waiting times have been too long for the last few months, due to increase in emergency orders and partly due to staff retention issues, however staff numbers have improved.
- A significant number of people have experienced frustrating situations, so the Council has commissioned HQN to undertake a systems thinking style customer care review to look at each stage of the experience and recommend improvements.
- Meeting was advised that supervisors and the dedicated leak team are presently reviewing all outstanding leak actions before actions are finally closed.
- Also how Council manages its housing complaints is being reviewed with a view to providing a holistic service.
- The Council aims to launch an improved information systems during large events (power outages, heating failures etc) and improve online offer.
- On the proposed timeline for the proposed changes and actions, meeting was advised that the Council is working on it and details will be brought back to committee in the near future.
- On the processes involved resolving mould and damp, the meeting was advised that anyone experiencing these issues would report it via the Council's general repair process, after which it would be allocated for an inspection and advice is provided and information following a visit and then repairs undertaken, however more needs to be done.
- In response to a question on how many cases and details on leaks, condensation etc, meeting was advised that a report would be brought to committee in the future, that there are presently about 150 cases which have been identified.
- On whether council had any details of ongoing legal proceedings against the Council regarding damp and mould, meeting was advised that officers are sifting through a lot of repair cases and presently exact numbers regarding damp and mould are not available.
- Meeting was advised that surveys of the housing stock will be carried out by in house surveyors and additional resources is being embarked for the programme.
- On the role of the environmental health team in addressing damp and mould, meeting was advised that housing officers work closely with their counterparts and regularly refer cases to them.
- In response to Housing Ombudsman claims that housing officers first response is to blame resident's lifestyle for incidents of damp and mould in their properties, the meeting was advised that things have changed following the Andover Estate experience, that officers now recognise the causes of damp and mould are complex and the council should ensure it offers suitable responses for every case
- Council should be more proactive, carrying out individual visits to properties especially where cases had already been reported, similar to how Council undertakes its annual gas safety checks of properties , the Director advised that all options were being considered and a report detailing the cost of such exercise would be reported back to committee in due course.

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- Officer also acknowledged that the quality of materials used for repairs are being reviewed to ensure that it meets high standards.
- A suggestion about using forums like the Tenant and Resident Panel to hold councillors and council accountable was noted. Meeting was advised that officers will be updating ward councillors of instances of mould and damp within their wards going forward.
- The Chair stated that in light of the serious nature of damp and mould within the council's housing stock and its potential impact on residents wellbeing and welfare, this issue should be included as a standard item on the committee agenda for the next few meetings.
- With regards to how much it will cost the council to resolve this issue, officer advised that information is unavailable, although presently the council has committed a level of expenditure in its overall repair budget to address this issue.
- The Chair acknowledged the enormity of the task ahead, however Committee would welcome the cost the council as it is important that Council is not only viewed as open and transparent by its residents, it would also assist the council identify and plan its priorities. The Chair requested that information on cost should be presented to the committee.
- On the issue of procurement, meeting was advised that 80% of the works is carried out by the Council's in house repairs team and 20% by external contractors, that the latter is generally used for large and complex cases.
- Meeting was advised that the Council is in discussions with other housing providers to carry out similar works and getting them to review works already carried out.
- A suggestion that the key to resolving ongoing issues raised by residents is for all repairs to be followed up after some agreed time period after the initial repairs were originally carried out to establish if it has been fully resolved before it is signed off.
- With regards to access to central government grant to support council in resolving this issue, meeting was advised of an ongoing campaign and lobbying on this issue for over a decade.
- A suggestion for officers to revisit both the findings and recommendations of the housing ombudsman's findings was noted.
- The Chair thanked both the Executive Member and officers, noting the importance of this issue and requesting that officers schedule this item on the agenda for future meetings.

RESOLVED:

Item to be scheduled on the agenda of the committee for future meetings

28 WORK PROGRAMME 2022/23 (Item B6)

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted.

The meeting ended at 10.15 pm

CHAIR