

Housing Scrutiny Committee - 2 February 2023

Minutes of the meeting of the Housing Scrutiny Committee held at Council Chamber, Town Hall, Upper Street, N1 2UD on 2 February 2023 at 7.30 pm.

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

Councillor Jason Jackson in the Chair

29 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Item 1)

Apologies were received from Councillor Spall.

30 DECLARATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (Item 2)

There were no declarations of substitute members.

31 DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS (Item 3)

There were no declarations of interest.

32 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING (Item 4)

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 1 December 2022 be confirmed as an accurate record of proceedings and the Chair be authorised to sign them.

33 CHAIR'S REPORT (Item 5)

Meeting was informed that officers will be facilitating a site visit to view void properties, that this will be an opportunity for members to have a better understanding of the whole process.

Chair advised that having attended a housing conference on Regeneration a few days ago which was very enlightening, it was reassuring to note that Islington Council is taking a lead in that area.

Meeting was informed that questions received from a co-optee unable to attend the meeting in relation to Peabody's development at the Former Holloway Prison site will be forwarded to relevant Executive Member and officers to respond.

34 EXTERNAL ATTENDEES (IF ANY) (Item 6)

None

35 ORDER OF BUSINESS (Item 7)

The order of business would be as per the agenda.

36 **PUBLIC QUESTIONS (Item 8)**

37 **EXTERNAL ATTENDEES (IF ANY) (Item 9)**

38 **DAMP AND MOULD - PRESENTATION (Item B1)**

- Committee received a presentation from Matt West , Assistant Director – Housing Property Services on the Council’s response to Damp and Mould issues within its housing stock and the following issues were highlighted –
- In terms of definition, the director advised that damp is a case where there is excessive moisture in a building, whilst condensation is moisture in the air forming on cold surfaces and in the case of mould which is harmful and hazardous which is fungus growth on surfaces thrives on food and moisture.
- Meeting was advised of the importance of identifying the causes of damp in order to address it and includes repairs, building design, overcrowding and fuel poverty.
- Director advised that in the last 3 years, the Service has received over 4510 requests for inspections in 3661 properties (13%), that 95% of in which have been resolved in one or two visits and 5% have required more than two visits.
- Presently there are 20 on going live legal cases about damp and mould, that data does suggest damp cases exist in all wards and property types with some estates experiencing higher incidents and notably fewer cases in communally heated estates.
- Members were advised that the Council is ensuring that it is easy to report incidents of damp and mould, that there is now in place a dedicated phone line, that priority is given to vulnerable cases where damp keeps returning or tenants have particular vulnerability. Also all cases are logged and cannot be untracked until survey works and a three month check have been completed,
- Director informed the meeting that although not a solution in the long run, priority is given to mould wash so as to remove any risk of it spreading.
- The Director highlighted other support such as its links with support for fuel poverty by providing advice or signposting residents to available council support, it also ensures that its Capital works programme consider damp as part of its programme and that it ensures the heat map highlights multiple properties in the same block so we can check on other residents.
- On revisiting cases where damp and mould have been reported in the last 3years, the Council is offering a visit to every property, that it uses a mix of data to assess the risk of each case and are visiting the worst cases first. Basis.
- The Service made 150 contacts with its residents in January of which 22 have been resolved and in the month of February, it will embark on bulk call to all cases.
- Training has been provided for all people who enter properties to recognise and report it, that the Council’s approach is being designed with a range of partners, that it will be creating a way to share information and flag concerns.

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- Meeting was advised that there is a recognition that damp and mould is more wider and complex than just repairs, that the council is now being proactive around supporting residents with heat poverty, the need to increase housing supply and ensuring that support is available for vulnerable tenants.
- Meeting was advised of the various Capital Works, that several schemes were either already underway or completed, for example with the Andover, several pilot schemes had been completed regarding the programme of insulating cold surfaces and improving ventilation. Similarly in Girdlestone, roof improvements have been carried out, asbestos has been removed and water supply has been improved with works around the drainage been carried out.
- In the case of street properties, meeting was advised of (SHDF) Social Housing Decarbonisation fund which has been used to carry out insulation work improving EPC rating through insulation and window improvements.
- As part of Council's efforts to address damp and mould, meeting was advised that the Service will be undertaking annual housing audits, an opportunity for officers to check a range of issues with residents ,collecting information to help run services suited for tenants needs and to receive direct feedback from every home, that it is important through the audit, officers pick up issues with homes that cannot or would not report incidents using existing means.
- Members were advised that due to the high profile cases reported in the press, there has been high levels of demand, that the Council is struggling to bring in additional surveyors as this is a national issue.
- The Executive Member for Housing and Communities reiterated systems are in place, that all damp and mould cases will be tracked and speedy resolved, reminding the public that any incidents should be reported to the Housing Direct on 0207 5275406 or Freephone number 0800 6943344 or email - dampandmould@Islington.gov.uk or the Executive Member Cllr Una O'Halloran.
- Members were advised that both techniques training and systems are being reviewed by HQN/UCL and industry experts, that it will be using UCL NZC data to look at possible overall costs or investment and consider the use of automated tracking systems going forward.
- In response to a question on how many disrepair cases are yet to be settled legally by the Council, The Assistant Director advised that information will be circulated to Committee members.
- On the involvement of the Housing Ombudsman, the meeting was advised that the Council is responding to their request, that the Council is given it a high priority and that Committee will be updated in due course.
- In response to an enquiry on whether Council had plans to clear gutters annually as it remains one of the causes of damp and mould, the Director acknowledged that there is a programme to address this issue, noting that the Service needs to be more proactive around this issue.
- The Director acknowledged that the Council will be considering further technology to identify damp and mould in properties acknowledging the use of infra red cameras and hydrometer to assess the level of dampness. Meeting was also advised that the service is looking at other diagnostic

technology as part of the ongoing review of technology being used, noting that the use of H Vacuum units in buildings as it tolerates the building atmosphere as it keeps the temperature at medium.

- Meeting was reminded that the focus should be around preventive measures rather than repairs and that the suggestion that residents should open windows and their heating on is not practicable especially during this period of high energy costs.
- With regard how RSL's manage damp and mould, meeting was advised that the Council shares its damp framework with them to ensure that they are being proactive. Meeting was also advised that the Director, the Executive Member and the 2 Members of Parliament (MP) had met recently met 2 leading Housing Association to discuss the issue among other subjects such as performances and strategic alignment so as to hold them to account.
- The Executive Member reiterated that resident with issues of damp and mould who require a survey should contact Housing Direct on 0207 527 5400 or the freephone number of 0800 694 3344 or email directly to dampandmould@islington.gov.uk.

RESOLVED:

That the presentation be noted

That Officers will provide information regarding the pending live cases

39

VOIDS AND PERFORMANCE - PRESENTATION (Item B2)

Committee received a presentation from Matt West, Assistant Director – Housing Property Services on how the Council manages its void properties and the processes involved and the following issues were highlighted –

- In terms of delivery, meeting was advised that keys received, left items are itemised by Housing Management Teams, survey is carried out, the clearance of lumber goods, works are carried out by contractors or In House repair officers, then it is put through the Choice Based Lettings/Viewing Process Works completed and Certificate and Quality check.
- In terms of performance meeting was advised that in January the number of voids in progress is 172, that the average days to clear lumber on a yearly basis is improving noting the difficulty in the last few years when performance was low due to covid and the transfer of some street properties in house.
- Meeting was advised of the high numbers of voids, approximately 1000 in 2022-2023 compared to 750 in 2021-2022) due to the increased works required in the voids, Fire risk assessment (FRA) to be undertaken and asbestos surveys
- In addition, there have been more vulnerable allocations which have required last minute adaptations and works, also the loss of white goods and recycling supplier and meter changes have caused delays
- Director advised that the Service is currently looking at new contractors regarding supply of meters and that a new supplier is now in place for white goods supplier.

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- Meeting was advised that the Service is reviewing its end to end process, to ensure that it hands over repairs and sign up residents as quick as possible.
- In terms of the Buy back Scheme, Council is purchasing ex right to buy properties which is to be used for temporary accommodation, that additional 130 properties have been acquired for homeless families to remain in the borough rather than using private sector rental.
- Members were advised of the increased pressure on Voids section to bring voids up to standard, furnished and supplied with white goods but this has been very challenging as these properties have been out of council's control and management for quite a while and will require surveys and additional resources.
- In response to a question, meeting was advised that a void is a property that is designated as empty at the end of the tenancy and this could be when a council tenant receives an eviction notice or tenant dies and the property returned to the Council which will then be reserviced and a new tenancy commences with a new tenant.
- An empty property is a case where either the tenant is not living in the property because they are in care or hospital, that this is not a tenancy management issue to resolve. Meeting was informed that in some cases maybe due to the tenant's capacity a decision about the tenancy cannot be taken and will only be taken by the tenant or resolved by the courts involvement and this can take a long period unfortunately.
- Meeting was advised of succession cases, when a tenant dies and someone remains in the property seeking to take over the tenancy, that this will require further investigation to ascertain if they are relatives.
- The Director acknowledged that presently there are a number of succession cases under investigative, noting that there is a need to improve the performance in this area.
- To date there are 215 empty properties which are not classified as void, 66 of which are with the Council's legal services for possession, 37 cases are with investigation because possible fraudulent concerns and 25 are open cases which have been awarded discretionary succession.
- On the number of empty properties or voids in Housing Association and what influence the Council has, the Director advised of an Housing Association forum which meets every 2 weeks where these issues are raised, reminding the meeting that the Chair has requested 5 of the big Housing Associations be invited to the Committee at a future meeting, an opportunity for members to scrutinise their activities.
- On the suggestion to retrofit void properties, the Director welcomed the suggestion but reminded meeting that in light of the pressure on the Housing Register, the priority is to put the property back into use and make it available to another tenant.
- With regards concerns that properties on estates were being used as Airbnb by absentee council tenants, meeting was asked to report it to Housing Fraud on 0207 5277432, or email, housing.fraud@islington.gov.uk and officers will investigate . The Executive Member noted that going forward with housing officers doing annual visit it is hoped that this issue will be addressed. In addition to the above, the Director noted that with the proposed housing

audit checks, this will include a cross referencing with credit checks and the electoral register.

The Chair thanked the Director, acknowledging that in light of the pressures on the housing register it is important to investigate further on void and empty properties as families are in need of council housing and prevent fraudulent activities.

RESOLVED:

That the presentation be noted.

40

QUARTERLY HOUSING PERFORMANCE (Q2 2022/23) (Item B3)

Committee received the above report. Councillor O'Halloran, Executive Member for Homes and Communities and the Assistant Director responded to some of the issues raised in the report. The following issues were highlighted-

- Meeting was advised that in terms of the number of people sleeping rough in Islington the council has rehoused almost 200 people over the last 12 months, and that only 3 people are sleeping rough on Islington streets tonight. These three people have been offered accommodation and support, but at the moment these people have refused the offers of accommodation and support. These people are not local to Islington, but the council wishes to end rough sleeping. Members were reminded that data from the GLA shows that over 1700 people are sleeping on the streets in the last quarter.
- On the rent arrears, meeting was advised that the Council is owed £8m, with an average £1,017 per tenant and that the Council is supporting tenants - look at Ian's response
- In terms of council homes, 153 homes will be delivered this year, that conditions are very challenging in light of Brexit affecting skilled workers and the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine affecting supply chain.
- On the number of affordable new homes, a member requested that the inclusion of shared ownership and social rented in the data being reported was misleading and should in future be separated.
- With regards accessibility to the Council's hardship funds and whether it was only restricted to residents in council housing stock, meeting was advised that funds are available for residents living in Islington.
- The Director acknowledged that building new homes is a challenge, that all efforts to lobby the government to address how Council's borrow money and restricting the Council's right to buy receipts.
- On the issue of rent arrears, meeting was advised of an average of £1,017.17, a total of £8.7m from, that about 8,453 out of the 26,000 + households are in some form of rent arrears.
- The Director noted that most of these arrears are a result of the welfare reform which has had a huge impact on our residents due to the introduction of the universal credit.
- Meeting was advised that as noted in the report and the Council's aim to build social rented homes, there is a place for shared ownership and that in the last year 586 Council rented homes and only 24 shared owned properties.

- On the resident satisfaction surveys meeting was advised that this is related to capital works and not first time fixes, that officers are considering a better way of reporting measures, that the use of independent company rather than that carried out by the Contractor.
- The Hardship funds is not managed by the Housing Department but Corporate Resources , that it is accessible to all that reside in Islington and not solely for Council tenants

41 HOUSING ALLOCATIONS SCHEME CONSULTATION DISCUSSION (Item B4)

Islington's Director Housing Needs and Strategy informed the meeting that a report on the draft allocation scheme was considered at the Executive meeting on 12 January, that it is now out for public consultation till 17 March.

- As community leaders, Members are encouraged to invite the wider community to be involved, that 76% of residents on the council's Housing Register and residents of Islington Council and 86% of Partner agencies are in favour of the changes to the scheme.
- On the question regarding the new generation scheme and whether anyone whose parents own properties would be part of the scheme, the Director advised that nothing has been agreed and welcome all feedback.
- On the household total income figures provided, meeting was advised that these are from the GLA threshold used for low cost home ownership and intermediate rental scheme.
- Meeting was advised that the online consultation exercise is an opportunity for all to participate, that all feedback is welcomed, it is not guaranteed that all areas subject to the consultation framework will be incorporated in the final scheme, that it will be an open and transparent process

RESOLVED:

That the draft report on the allocation scheme be noted

42 TENANT SATISFACTION MEASURES (Item B5)

Islington's Director Housing Needs and Strategy informed the meeting that the Tenant Satisfaction Measures (TMS) is a requirement of the Regulator of Social Housing (RSH) that all social landlords have to collect and report on -

- That measures are based around a series of themes important to tenants and have been introduced to demonstrate the individual performance of landlords to their tenants and to allow RSH to compare performances between landlords.
- Consultation was carried out in March 2022, that the Tenant Satisfaction Measures Standard sets out the reporting requirements for TMS and was published in 2022.
- Landlords are required to collect and report on 22 metrics across 5 themes of which 10 will be measured by landlords through their performance indicators and 12 will be measured by an annual tenant perception survey.

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- The Tenant Satisfaction measures does not apply to leaseholders and that landlords will need to start data collection in April 2023, that landlords with 1,000 or more homes will send first years worth 2023/24 of tenant satisfaction measures results to the RSH in summer 2024.
- The Director advised that TMS will be considered by Committee in its quarterly performance report.
- In response to a question on if Housing Associations TMS could be made available for comparison with those of the Council, the Director advised that in the future, it will be published on the government website, that at the moment landlords will have to volunteer to allow Housemark which is a benchmark club. Members were reminded that Islington's Satisfaction measure is presently 65% up from 60% which is still below the national average is 79%, that there is room for improvement going forward.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted.

43 ISLINGTON BROADBAND (Item B6)

Islington's Director Housing Needs and Strategy informed the meeting that Council has entered into wayleave agreement with two providers and negotiations continue with BT Openreach and GNetwork

The work programme set up for the next 2 years and details will be made available at the next meeting.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted.

44 WORK PROGRAMME 2022/23 (Item B7)

The Chair informed the meeting that committee will be taking evidence from Islington Planning Service regarding its policy and process on addressing overcrowding within Islington.

RESOLVED:

That Islington Planning Service be invited to the meeting in March to give evidence/presentation on its process and policy to address overcrowding in Islington homes.

The meeting ended at 9.25 pm

CHAIR